

Students get look at rural medicine in WNC

by Julie Ball

ASHEVILLE — Medical student Yolanda Paylor spent part of her summer with patients in rural Mitchell County.

She spent time in an office with Dr. Brie Folkner as part of a program that aims to boost the number of physicians serving in rural or currently underserved areas.

“A lot of times she (Dr. Folkner) would let me go in ahead of her, and I would interview the patient, see how they were doing. They would tell me and then I would present to her,” Paylor said.

Paylor is one of seven students in the Sarah Graham Kenan Rural and Underserved Medical Scholars program. The students were assigned to practices from Sylva to Linville and they recently completed their work. This is the first year for the program, which is funded by Kenan family, according to Dr. Robyn Latessa, campus director for the UNC School of Medicine-Asheville and medical director for the Rural Scholars program. It is a collaboration between the UNC School of Medicine and Mountain Area Health Education Center, or MAHEC.

“The plan is that we are a pilot,” Latessa said. “They are watching us closely to possibly help fund other programs like this in other areas of North Carolina.”

The demand for primary care doctors is expected to grow. And rural communities can have a tough time recruiting doctors.

“The goal of the Rural Scholars program is really to expose students to rural primary care and increase the number of students going into rural primary care,” Latessa said. “There’s just such a shortage of rural primary care doctors, especially in Western North Carolina.”

First-year medical students from the UNC School of Medicine were selected for the program in January. The summer between their first and second year of medical school, students spend six weeks in WNC, shadowing health care providers in rural areas.

The program will continue in their second year with a series of seminars, and third-year students return to Asheville for their clinical work.

“These seven students will be part of a group of 20 who will spend their whole third year here,” Latessa said.

The number of slots for the UNC School of Medicine Asheville campus is expanding from 10 to 20 in 2014. About two-thirds of the graduates go into primary care, Latessa said.

Paylor, 23, says she’s “85 percent sure” that she will go into family medicine.

At the Spruce Pine practice, she got to see firsthand the relationship between physician and rural patients. “I think the beautiful thing about it is you are keeping up with these patients. You are following a patient. You know if their health changes. You know if they come in and they are not acting like they normally do. You know something is wrong,” she said.

The Hillsborough resident says rural life appeals to her and so does rural medicine. “As a doctor you do more, you see more,” she said.

A rural family medicine doctor isn't just a "gatekeeper," referring patients to other doctors.

"You have to know things beyond medicine," Paylor said. "You have to know the living conditions your patients are dealing with, how's the poverty, if they're not insured, do you know why?"

In Spruce Pine, Paylor got hands-on experience. "She (Dr. Folkner) didn't mind me doing the physical exam if I felt that was necessary because that was part of the presentation," she said. "If a person came in complaining about abdominal pain, I would do the abdominal exam and share my findings with her. Of course, she always went behind me and did the same thing."

In addition to the Rural Scholars program, another MAHEC program is giving undergraduate students in UNC Asheville's pre-health programs a chance for clinical experience and research. Natalie Karr, 20, was one of 10 students taking part in the summer internship that places UNCA students at MAHEC clinical learning sites. Karr spent time at Hendersonville Family Medicine.

"I definitely want to do medical school. Right now, it's way too early for me to decide what residency I want to go into, but I really love family medicine," Karr said. The eight-week internship involves 10 hours a week of clinical shadowing and 10 hours of research. Karr's research involved examining hospital readmission rates.

"It (the program) provides them with clinical experience and research," Latessa said. That clinical experience can be difficult to come by. "It's often hard for people in undergrad and high school to get the exposure they want to medicine," Karr said. "Sometimes when they get to medical school, they may feel this is not the right path for them." Latessa said participation in the summer program makes UNCA students more attractive as medical school candidates.

The program is a partnership between MAHEC and UNCA, with UNCA providing funding to expand the summer internship to 10 students. Latessa said she hopes the UNCA internship program will become a pipeline for the Rural Scholars program, helping UNCA students with admission to medical school and bringing them back to Asheville as Rural Scholars.



Yolanda Paylor, left, a University of North Carolina Chapel Hill student, is one of seven students who took part in the Rural Scholars program this summer. UNC Asheville student, Natalie Karr, right, took part in a MAHEC summer internship. / Bill Sanders/wsanders@citizen-times.com