



The Mountain Area Health Education Centers Program
Asheville Family Medicine Residency

Transformative Training in Western North Carolina

By Peter Graber
NCAFP Director of Communications

On a beautiful Saturday evening last September, the Mountain Area Health Education Centers Program (MAHEC) celebrated its 40th anniversary with an event that brought together program leaders spanning four decades. Attending were numerous MAHEC visionaries credited with launching the program and establishing it as one of the most successful of its kind in the nation.

Since MAHEC's earliest days, its core mission has been to strengthen the healthcare workforce that serves its 16-county coverage area in western North Carolina. The linchpin to realizing this vision has been MAHEC's family medicine residency program at Asheville (MAHEC-A), one of the state's largest and most progressive training programs. Founded in 1976, MAHEC-A has graduated more than 280 family physicians, with more than 62% continuing to practice across the region.

Embracing Transformation

Like many family medicine residencies today, MAHEC-A has been hard at work adapting to a steady stream of changes taking place within the specialty and in healthcare delivery. Program leaders view these changes as placing a new set of skills requirements on tomorrow's family physicians, particularly in the areas of quality, value-based care delivery, and population health.

"As a resident back in the late 1990s, 99% of what we learned was about what happened in the exam room in the one-on-one patient encounter. Now, although great clinical care continues to be our foundation and 90% of what we teach, the remainder now is chronic care management and increasingly, population management," noted Dr. Blake Fagan, MAHEC-Asheville Residency Program Director.

Dr. Fagan has been the program's director for the last six years and has seen a lot of changes since completing his residency training with MAHEC in 2001. But

to Dr. Fagan, all have been focused on improving the training experience, and preparing residents for an exciting future.

The most visible aspect of MAHEC-A's transformation is the program's new outpatient teaching center. Situated on the 14-acre Mary C. Nesbitt Biltmore Campus, MAHEC-A moved into the 40,000 square foot Family Health Center just over a year ago. The new center is 50% larger than its old facility and much better equipped to support the program's growing case management team, and its efforts in training residents on emerging new models of care delivery, like group visits.

"With the accountable care model emerging, the thought is that group visits are a great way to help achieve better population health," explained Dr. Fagan. "And for populations, it's not just the patients our residents see, it's also the ones they don't see." Dr. Fagan described how its new group visits room allows residents to see multiple patients simultaneously for issues like diabetes and prenatal care. He even noted that

residents are also receiving excellent feedback in how they're integrating other services into their care process, like pharmacy and behavioral health. The new center is making all of this easier.

Apart from its clinical operations, MAHEC-A is also using some newer teaching methods to actively engage residents. Similar to its group visits, the program's weekly didactic sessions are being delivered in small group formats using the 'flipped classroom' model. This model works to identify the subject areas requiring the most concentrated teaching, helping to make better use to time and enhancing overall lesson quality. Residents also are pressed to apply their learning through small group casework.

Even with these improvements, the program hasn't lost sight of its ultimate goal of strengthening the health workforce. Keeping graduates in the region long term is crucial, and to help drive this, the program recently expanded its post-graduate offerings with a new sports medicine fellowship. According

to Dr. Fagan, the fellowship is helping recruiting, providing a much needed community service, and now offers another great reason to stick around Asheville after graduation. MAHEC-A also offers fellowship training in geriatrics, hospice and palliative medicine, and obstetrics.

Preparing Family Physicians to Meet the Need

Since it began in 1976, MAHEC-A's mission has been to produce family physicians who are expertly trained and adaptable in serving the needs of small towns and underserved communities. MAHEC-A blends a demanding clinical curriculum with a service philosophy that trains residents to integrate a range of services into their care process to help realize this goal. The net effect of these efforts has been a steady output of extremely well-trained graduates who complete their training with strong professional ties to the region and to the overall MAHEC program. From a high level, MAHEC-A's training environments are a blend of urban, suburban, and rural facilities.

The program's in-patient training experience takes place at Mission Hospital in Asheville, an 800+ bed critical care and regional referral center that houses North Carolina's busiest emergency room, and also one of its most demanding pediatrics centers. Because the hospital offers nearly every imaginable service and serves such a large catchment area, Mission can really be considered a combination of a busy community hospital and an academic medical center.

MAHEC-A's outpatient and continuity experiences consist of residents staffing the busy Family Health Center, but also serving some rural clinics affiliated with the program. Team-based care in each of these locations is playing an increasingly larger role. Residents work closely with professionals from across MAHEC's residency programs (dental, pharmacy, and ob-gyn), to integrate those services into their care when appropriate, but also to serve patients referred from those services as well. It all works to promote synergy across MAHEC's entire service spectrum, improve quality, and reflects

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**MAHEC-Asheville's Dr. Blake Fagan,
Residency Program Director**



MAHEC-ASHEVILLE

the program's embrace of team-based care and population health.

Current MAHEC-A second-year resident Dr. Ben Aiken recognized the power of the program's progressive thinking as he investigated training programs across the country. As a UNC medical student who participated in the school's longitudinal curriculum in Asheville, Aiken was familiar with many aspects of MAHEC. While visiting residencies across the country, he was drawn back to MAHEC-A by the people and the progressiveness of the training.

"One of the things that I was drawn to in coming here and what my experience has affirmed, is that I will be very prepared to practice in a rapidly changing healthcare system," explained Dr. Aiken. He went on to share that progressive thinking and training is shared by everyone: residents, faculty, administrators and staff.

The changing healthcare system -- with its trends towards quality, value, and patient-centeredness -- are squarely on the minds of residency program leaders and across



Dr. Ben Aiken

MAHEC's Division of Family Medicine. Fortunately for residency trainees, opportunities to learn about these concepts and how they're being addressed are close by. Earlier this year, MAHEC partnered with Mission Health to manage 22 Mission-owned primary care clinics across the region. This has enabled MAHEC-A residents to see firsthand the issues in delivering progressive, patient-centered care across a network that spans both urban and rural environments. Additionally, MAHEC and its family medicine division are key players in developing the western North Carolina's first integrated clinical network that's set to launch later next year.

Dr. Fagan sees the demand for high quality primary care only increasing in the coming years. Even with Asheville and its surrounding region well-served by MAHEC's family medicine residency, much more work still needs to be done. It's estimated that there is still a demand for 140 more primary care physicians to serve the region at this time.

But MAHEC-A is committed and busy tackling the challenge through its progressive approach. With dedicated people and a clear vision, its future looks as bright as its history.