

Help MAHEC Help the Community

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by Julie Ball

ASHEVILLE — Dr. Brian Moore planned to move back to Georgia once he completed his family medicine residency through the Mountain Area Health Education Center, better known as MAHEC.

But like many of the doctors trained through MAHEC, Moore decided to stay in Western North Carolina. “I guarantee that if most anyone around here looked at their family physician, probably half of them are going to be MAHEC graduates,” Moore said. Nearly 40 years after the residency program began, MAHEC is continuing to produce doctors who stay in the region.

Now, the organization is creating a charitable gift program to help enhance the work it is doing in the community, said Dr. Jeffery Heck, MAHEC president and CEO. Today, the organization will host an event to launch its “First Day of Giving” campaign. “I think the pressures of the changing health care situation, the anticipated declining reimbursement for medical service, particularly for poor people, I think we have to look outside the traditional ways to fund those services,” Heck said.

Although many in the region know a MAHEC-trained doctor, they may not know much about the organization. MAHEC, which is a nonprofit, got its start in 1974. With a shortage of doctors in some rural areas, the state in the 1970s created a network of nine Area Health Education Centers across North Carolina. The idea was to move medical education out of academic health centers in the center of the state and into rural areas of the state. Since it started, MAHEC has trained nearly 380 doctors and dentists. Of family medicine graduates, 62 percent have stayed in the region.

“MAHEC, over the last 38 years, has done an excellent job of getting our graduates into Western North Carolina practices,” Heck said. MAHEC treats patients with private insurance as well as those with Medicaid. The center also receives funding for residency training and has additional grants to support specific projects.



Resident Dr. Susan McDowell examines Jasia Jorlang at the MAHEC Family Medical Center in Asheville. John Fletcher/Jfletcher@citizen-times.com

In January of last year, MAHEC moved to a new facility on Hendersonville Road. This summer, MAHEC’s family medicine practice and residency program currently housed at a site on W.T. Weaver Boulevard will be moving to a new facility on Hendersonville Road as well.

MAHEC also has a family medicine residency program in Hendersonville. The OB-GYN program is at the MAHEC facility on Hendersonville Road. Of the births at Mission Hospital in fiscal year 2011-12, 44 percent involved MAHEC physicians and residents. The



Resident Dr. Yu Kwan Chan examines the broken ankle of Rene Flores-Alegre at the MAHEC Family Medical Center in Asheville. John Fletcher/Jfletcher@citizen-times.com

residency program includes working with high-risk pregnancies. Dr. Ladson Gaddy-Dubac of Angel OB/GYN in Franklin went through the OB residency.

“I think they (MAHEC) are instrumental at really preparing their graduates to take on those roles in rural communities because it is different,” Gaddy-Dubac said. “I think especially, the OB program, I definitely felt like I had the experience to come to a rural area.” Gaddy-Dubac is a graduate of Enka High School and got her medical degree from UNC Chapel Hill.

MAHEC has fellowships in geriatrics and in hospice and palliative care. In addition, MAHEC runs the Asheville medical school campus for third- and fourth-year students from UNC Chapel Hill.

MAHEC provides continuing education opportunities for thousands of health care workers across a 16-county area. “We have about 23,000 participants a year,” Heck said. And MAHEC is working with primary care practices to implement electronic health records systems to improve quality and efficiency, officials say.

Moore said MAHEC is one of the top residency programs for family medicine in the country. Several hundred apply for nine slots in the family medicine program. “They’re actually turning out a really good product. They fill with top-notch graduates from across the country,” he said.

Even with MAHEC, the region continues to need primary care doctors. “Our goal is to train doctors for practice in small town America,” said Tina Owen, MAHEC director of development. “We really believe we are here to train them to keep them in Western North Carolina.” As a safety net provider, MAHEC has provided \$4.8 million in care for low-income and uninsured patients last year, Owen said.

Heck said the organization would like to enhance its work in several areas including expanding services to low-income pregnant women. “One of the areas where I think we have been most active is in women’s health. We provide a lot of services for low-income, pregnant women,” he said. “We’d like to have our services available to more women in the rural areas and to expand our services to include even more access.”

Another focus area is geriatric care, Heck said. MAHEC would also like to expand its internships for WNC college students interested in the health care profession, he said. “Our fundraising will take a very low-key approach. We are interested if there are organizations or patients that really support the work that MAHEC has done over the years; we would love to partner with them,” Heck said.