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SMH, FSU partnership benefits both hospital, school.

SARASOTA -- When the 24-hour emergency room opens Sept. 1 at the North Port Medical Plaza off Toledo Blade Boulevard, residents will be seen by doctors, nurses and technicians. But at some point, patient care also will be provided by a group of medical students.

Twenty-one students from the Florida State University College of Medicine were introduced Monday to the Sarasota Memorial Public Hospital Board. The students -- now in the third year of FSU's four-year program training future physicians -- will rotate during the next two years through a number of SMH departments and facilities -- including, possibly, the North Port ER.

FSU began its affiliation with SMH five years ago and operates out of a building at 201 Coconut Ave. in Sarasota, one of the medical school's six regional campuses statewide. Three previous classes spent two years doing course work in Tallahassee and then served at SMH -- and other health-care facilities in Sarasota County -- before graduating as medical doctors.

"It's a big difference, a big change," said Dr. Bruce Berg, who has been Sarasota campus dean since the local program began. He said it's a difficult transition as the students switch from book learning to two years spent all day with patients, learning "how to deal with real people with real problems."

Primary care

Through its affiliation with SMH and other hospitals, FSU exposes its students to an array of specialties.

One of the third-year students introduced Monday was Jazmin Overton of Sarasota, who volunteered at SMH before graduating from Riverview High School in 2003. Overton and her classmates still have time to decide which specialty to pursue when they graduate from FSU and move on to a residency program.

Overton said her interest is increasing in primary care, a field of medicine not prevalent in many growing cities such as North Port. North Port, with a population of 56,000, recently welcomed its first pediatrician.

Recognizing such disparities, FSU places its primary emphasis on primary care medicine, Berg said.

"There is a tremendous need for primary care physicians," said Berg, who includes pediatricians, internal medicine physicians, family medicine physicians and -- in some cases -- obstetric and gynecological physicians in that realm.

"We are woefully lacking in all of those practices in a whole variety of cities and towns in this country. Our purpose (at FSU) is to see if we can generate interest in that."

Nontraditional setting

Like Overton, her medical school classmate Roderick F. Hook, of Jacksonville, also earned a bachelor's degree from FSU. He was attracted to Sarasota because of the weather, the beaches, the architecture and the people. But he anticipates 50-hour work weeks.

"My goals are to learn as much as possible in every aspect of medicine ... and be as good a physician as I can when I get out and practice," Hook said.

FSU's Sarasota campus is not set up like traditional medical schools, which typically are affiliated with hospitals and residency programs on the same campus, such as Shands Hospital and the University of Florida in Gainesville.

FSU's model of partnering with regional hospitals is "a brand new type of model" that is growing in popularity, Berg said.

"By assigning a student to a practicing physician ... we've created a program whereby the students get excellent training," he said. "The difference is they are (working) one-on-one with board-certified physicians."

While the system makes the students more accountable, it also helps the physicians supervising them, one SMH official said.

When patients are treated in an academic setting, the interaction between eager and inquisitive students and their supervising doctors "keeps our doctors up to snuff, because they have to answer medical student questions about almost everything," said Dr. Parlane Reid, SMH chief medical officer. "I think a lot of our doctors enjoy teaching."

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