Better primary care key to healthier babies

FSU training primary care docs to improve outcomes for moms, babies

Written by Sean Rossman Democrat staff writer
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Tallahassee’s only medical college has set a goal to train a new generation of primary care doctors to better treat the underserved rural and minority populations of Tallahassee and the surrounding counties — particularly mothers.

Florida State University’s College of Medicine’s hope is that by providing better access to these primary care physicians, the first point of professional medical help for most people, what they’ll create is a healthier community with more positive birth outcomes.

An alarming spike in Leon County infant mortality in 2012 sparked an effort amongst Leon County doctors, community members and health facilities to combat the problem. The numbers came after the death rate had been declining for three of the last five years and had reached its lowest level since 1996.

The school is doing its own part while continuing with its mission.

It hosted a preconception health conference in January that brought together more than 70 healthcare professionals to discuss new ways to engage women and their partners to plan in advance for pregnancy.

Dr. John Fogarty, the dean of the FSU College of Medicine, believes the school’s mission of producing the kinds of doctors that Florida needs most — primary care physicians working hard to treat medically underserved rural and minority populations — will lead to changes in the birthrate and the community’s overall health.

In the most recent infant mortality numbers from the Florida Department of Health, 19 of the 28 babies who died were black. That sent the black infant death rate to 15.7 per 1,000 live births, which is three times that of white babies last year.

Analyzing this disparity has been a focus for Dr. Joedrecka Brown, an associate professor of family medicine and rural health at FSU and a leading community voice on the issue.

She says there isn’t just one fix to the problem, but better access to primary care could be one part of moving the effort forward.

Without proper primary care or the knowledge to actively seek it, mothers can have health issues before conception, which could affect their pregnancy.
Brown has studied the subject and found that the reason why women don’t seek out proper care before they get pregnant are numerous, but at the root is the community they grow up in and various factors that impact a person’s health throughout their life.

“Your health is just not you alone,” she said. “It’s more about the health of the woman and health of the community.”

Better access to primary care is one fix, but even completely solving that would be just the tip of the spear.

“There’s still all these other pieces that can contribute, so fixing just one part of the puzzle doesn’t fix the rest of it,” Brown said.

Fogarty wants to recruit students from these rural, minority and underserved communities, since they are more likely to go back and serve them when they’re done with their schooling.

“The best way to produce doctors who are going to serve the underrepresented, that are going to serve minority populations and are going to serve in rural areas, is to actually recruit them from there,” Fogarty said.

FSU College of Medicine ranks in the 93rd percentile of medical schools in percentage of graduates who are African American and in the 86th percentile when it comes to Hispanics, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges.

Fogarty says encouraging a career in primary care can start at FSU, where students are out in the community interacting with the communities that need the most help.

“If you’re out there in the community and you’re seeing populations of patients that are underserved, underrepresented, you have much more sense of what that community’s needs are,” Fogarty said.

Fogarty realizes tackling the problem of infant mortality and healthy birth outcomes in general is daunting, but says rebuilding a foundation of primary care can be part of the solution.

“We’re not going to fix this problem overnight. We could graduate 100 percent of our students in the pediatrics and family medicine and we still wouldn’t have enough doctors to take care of the population west of Tallahassee,” he said. “We need to rebuild a foundation of primary care so people have a place to go.”

Brown believes a “healthy environment shift” is what is really needed.

“If we can really get patients and communities and doctors, everybody to really focus on primary care then that I think will overall improve health,” she said.