

WHO CHOOSES RURAL MEDICINE?

Traditionally, the physicians most likely to practice in a rural area are those who grew up in one. So through its pipeline programs, the College of Medicine seeks out and nurtures potential physicians in places such as the Panhandle.

“We know that about 12 percent of the population of Florida is located across the rural Panhandle,” Van Durme said. “Twenty-five percent of our students come from that area.”

COLIN HACKLEY



Dr. Vechai Arunakul coaches Amanda Rose, Class of 2011, on how to operate a scope in Marianna's Jackson Hospital.

Blackburn notes, however, that a fair number of students in the Rural Track – such as this year's Joseph Gaskins from Fort Lauderdale – have big-city backgrounds. To her, the key is to find students predisposed to serving the underserved, whether urban or rural.

“Both involve working with limited resources, and poverty, and a lot of other social issues that are similar,” she said.

Getting those potential rural physicians into medical school is one thing. Getting them to actually move to a rural community after their training is more complicated.

“It's not enough to just have a student spend a week or a few weeks in a rural setting,” Van Durme said. “The training that we do has to have people there for significant periods of time. We need to have them living in that community, being a part of that community, not just commuting.”

Once they leave medical school, they spend at least three years at a residency site – and most medical students settle down in that general area. Florida has a shortage of residency sites, and rural residencies are almost unheard of. Across the U.S., Blackburn said, there are only 23 rural residencies for family medicine.

“There is a push to do more,” she said, “but also to make sure we understand what the problems are so that, if we are going to try to expand, we do it right.”

MARIANNA MEDICAL MYSTERY

Smaller towns have no shortage of rare maladies that help students learn. When Philip Burke spent the 2009-10 school year in Marianna, he encountered several unusual cases, including a woman with hemineglect.

She'd had a cerebral stroke on the left side of her brain and, as a result, had become completely unaware of everything in her right field of vision. On the left side, her hair was neatly brushed; on the right side, it was sticking out, unbrushed. On the left, her glasses were tucked neatly behind her ear; on the right, they were shoved way above the ear.

The best thing for such patients is intense rehab and physical therapy, says Burke, who was surprised that he didn't have to be in a big city to encounter so many unusual cases.



RAY STANVARD

Dr. Maggie Blackburn, the College of Medicine's director of rural health.