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FSU's College of Medicine Pensacola campus helping to solve doctor shortage crisis

Paul McLeod Guest columnist

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In the spring of 2003, the Pensacola medical community was called upon to address a serious problem facing the entire state of Florida. A growing and aging population needed doctors, especially primary care doctors. This shortage was especially serious for rural, geriatric and minority patients.

The then-fledgling Florida State University College of Medicine was created to provide a solution, with an eloquently simple model. After spending their first two years at the central campus in Tallahassee, medical students would be educated in local communities, in hopes that they would return there to practice. Looking back, it was an audacious, untraditional approach to medical education that had no shortage of skeptics.

The key to success rested with the willingness of the Pensacola community doctors and hospital systems to embrace the role of teaching partners, something that many of them had never done before. But the desire to give back was strong and we were able to build a clinical teaching faculty in short order. The enthusiasm of our new teachers was gratifying. Twenty years later, the doctors and hospital systems remain just as committed today as they were in the beginning.

Today, 391 local physicians serve as clinical teaching faculty for the future health-care providers from the College of Medicine's Pensacola Regional Campus. Through local and regional partnerships, they are training our students at six Pensacola hospitals and five others within the region, in addition to countless other medical facilities.

Our community continues to reap the rewards of this labor of love. We have added a Physician Assistant program to address the shortage of providers that could not be resolved with medical students alone.

Twenty years since opening our doors, more than 50 FSU College of Medicine alumni are practicing in our community. Each year the number grows, and the shortage shrinks just a little more. Having our own pipeline of providers is the best way to ensure that we are taking care of our population and providing access to the care they need. This is how communities can address their needs.

Who made this a success? Who are the heroes here?

The same doctors that provide world-class care to our community have provided world-class teaching for our students. Doctors like Jada Leahy (M.D. Class of 2009), who completed her medical training as a commissioned U.S. Navy officer and is both a practicing surgeon and the director of our campus' surgical education program. A Pine Forest High School graduate, Dr. Leahy was inducted into FSU Medical Alumni Hall of Fame on Sept. 23.

The commitment of our clinical teaching faculty has been unwavering, despite the challenges of COVID and the excessive administrative burdens placed upon them.

Educating the next generation of doctors and PAs remains a priority as our 20th class of medical students settle into their clinical rotations. We are blessed to have medical professionals who take their Hippocratic Oath seriously, despite the inconvenience it can cause. Moving forward, I can't help but reflect on our success and humbly say, "Thank You."

Paul McLeod, M.D. is the dean of the FSU College of Medicine's Pensacola Regional Campus and has called Pensacola home since 1975.