

FSU students get close look at community medicine

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In her third year of medical school, Jessica Gondela has delivered babies at Martin Memorial Medical Center and played dominoes against grandparents in Port St. Lucie.

While most medical school students spend their third and fourth years in large academic hospitals, Gondela, 25, is one of 19 third-year and 14 fourth-year Florida State University students making rounds through clinical rotations in doctors' offices and community hospitals across the Treasure Coast.

After two years of classes at the main Tallahassee campus, FSU students spend two years at one of six regional campuses to see how medicine is practiced in more rural regions — including a campus at Indian River State College in Fort Pierce. In return, the school hopes its graduates will fill much-needed primary care roles back in Florida where they studied.

"Hopefully, there's a greater chance of wanting to go back and see what it's like to be a doctor in the community, and it will entice them to come back after their residency," said Dr. Randall Bertolette, dean of the medical school's Fort Pierce campus.

About 200 doctors from Sebastian to Stuart mentor students during rotations in family medicine, pediatrics, obstetrics/gynecology, internal medicine, geriatrics, psychiatry surgery and emergency medicine. Those direct mentorships have big learning advantages over most schools, where students might answer to three or four clinical advisors before they can talk to a physician, said Dr. Peter Dayton, a Stuart physician who mentors students for the obstetrics/gynecology rotation.

"The whole idea is to develop regional campuses and expose students to a clinical directly with a physician, not a big pecking order," Dayton said.

In bigger teaching hospitals, there tend to be fewer routine procedures to observe. Students looking to enter obstetrics/gynecology, for example, would see a disproportionate number of complicated, high-risk pregnancies, Dayton said.

They assist in surgeries, help during deliveries and even see patients outside medical settings to get the big picture view of their patient bases. Gondela, for example, worked a rotation at the Council on Aging of St. Lucie County's adult day care, where — among other insights — she got a crash course on playing dominoes from the elderly patients.

FSU's medical school opened in 2000 with the unique learning model. Of its 30-student first graduating class, when only Tallahassee and Pensacola campuses existed, 14 students have finished their residencies and 10 returned to work in Florida, while the rest continued with specialty residencies and training, Bertollette said. Of its first six graduating classes, 55 percent of FSU med students went into primary care, said Beth Strack, the school's campus administrator for Fort Pierce.

The newest of the regional campuses, Fort Pierce opened in 2007. At the earliest, students from that first class would finish residencies in 2012, Bertollette said. Residencies occur after students' fourth year, and last at least three years.

For many students, Fort Pierce wasn't their top choice in the college's lottery system, since they weren't as familiar with the area as the rest of the locations, third-year student William Fields said. The other campuses include Pensacola, Orlando, Tallahassee, Daytona Beach and Sarasota.

But the current Fort Pierce class has made themselves at home on the Treasure Coast. Many students decided to bunk together in beachside condos on Hutchinson Island. They get together on the weekends and set up barbecues when they're not at hospitals or doctors' offices.

They've gotten acclimated to the area's wide variety of patients, and several said they'd think about returning to start their careers.

"I was excited to get this area," Fields said. "Seeing how the faculty and staff are awesome, there's no reason people shouldn't want to come here."



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