

Grant aims to enhance medical care for older adults in SWFL

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Older patients have a tough time getting in to see a geriatrician since so few practice in Southwest Florida.

Florida State University's College of Medicine, which trains fourth-year medical students in Collier County, is about to get help in its mission to train future primary care physicians, which includes geriatricians.

The U.S. Health and Human Services Department has earmarked \$2.25 million for FSU to enhance medical care for older adults. The Collier program is one of four regions in the state that will benefit, said Dr. Elena Reyes, regional director with FSU's medical school.

"This is great," she said. "In Florida and Southwest Florida, there are so many (seniors) in need," she said. "The grant is helping to enhance the care of the geriatric population of Southwest Florida.

Reyes does not know how much of the \$2.25 million will be allocated to the local program but she knows it will be used to help develop a curriculum for an FSU geriatrics professor who arrives in September.

The geriatrics professor will work out of a new clinic that will be jointly operated by the Healthcare Network of Southwest Florida and Senior Friendship Center, located at 2335 Stanford Ct., off Airport-Pulling Road, she said. He arrives in September when the clinic is targeted to open.

The geriatrics professor was scheduled to come to Naples regardless of the grant award, she said.

In addition, some of the grant money also will be used to train other medical professionals, such as nurses, in geriatric care, she said. The professor's hiring is tied to the new clinic initiative to streamline services for medically needy populations in the county.

HHS has allocated \$35.7 million nationwide to 43 others organizations in 29 states that operate similar programs to FSU's to boost geriatric care, which is part of the broader primary care field. The federal funding was announced last month during the White House Conference on Aging.

"The geriatrics programs supported by these grants help schools design curricula that respond to the needs of aging adults and leads to better care," HHS Secretary Sylvia Burwell, said in a news release. "These investments will promote access to quality health care for older adults by supporting their self management, their families' engagement in their care, and the dedicated caregivers who work with them."

Although the national shortage of primary care physicians and geriatricians is a national issue, the problem is particularly problematic in Florida because of the burgeoning elderly population.

Florida ranks 47th nationally in the number of geriatricians per capita, according to FSU.

In addition, one third of the nursing workforce is over age 50 and moving into retirement and about 40 percent of today's physicians are in this age bracket.

Reyes said the state and nation will never have enough geriatricians to meet the need, because of the time it takes to train new doctors, and so the alternative is to offer training in the field to the existing medical workforce.

The federal funding is for a national initiative called the Geriatrics Workforce Enhancement Program, according to an FSU.

“The ultimate goal is to enhance the workforce, nurses, social workers, primary-care physicians and the public,” Paul Katz, chairman of the department of geriatrics at FSU’s medical school, said.

According to the American Geriatrics Society, myriad factors are driving the demand for geriatric services. The reasons include greater longevity among Americans who have multiple health issues, the aging medical workforce and more people will be enrolling in Medicare.

By 2030, more than 20 percent of the population is expected to be 65 and older.

Fewer medical school graduates are pursuing advanced training in geriatrics and today there are an estimated 7,500 geriatricians in the U.S.

Part of the blame is that medical students incur huge debt for their education and the field does not pay relative to surgical fields and few medical schools require geriatric training, according to the geriatrics society.

An exception to that is Florida, FSU’s Reyes said.

“All medical students at their fourth year are required to have a geriatrics rotation,” she said, adding that FSU’s ongoing relationship with the Healthcare Network in Immokalee and Naples is where some medical students can meet that requirement.

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