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Halifax seeks more general surgeons

By ANNE GEGGIS, Staff Writer 

How we stack up

Here's how Florida fits in the national picture for its physician work force, according to the latest Association of American Medical Colleges figures:

- Fourth-oldest physician work force among states.
- Third for number of active physicians who graduated from an international medical school.
- 20th in number of physicians per capita, with Massachusetts having the most and Mississippi the fewest.
- 38th in the number of active physicians who completed undergraduate medical education in the state.
- 37th in the number of active physicians who completed an accredited residence or fellowship in the state.

â€ˆ SOURCE: Association of American Medical Colleges

DAYTONA BEACH -- At the end of this month, Dr. Jose Dimayuga plans on sewing up nearly 22 years of general surgery experience in this area.

With the average age of the area's general surgeons at 50 -- and the average age of general surgeons' retirement at 57 -- it's an announcement that's probably going to be coming more often. And a reality that threatens to leave no one on the other end of the phone to handle that emergency appendectomy in the middle of the night.

Halifax Health Medical Center is looking to stop the slide with a new and, some say, revolutionary new general surgery residency program, but they must overcome recent history to do it.

The population of Volusia and Flagler counties has increased nearly 20 percent in the last 15 years, but the number of general surgeons covering emergencies at Halifax, the area's largest hospital, has decreased by half, to just seven surgeons.

The trend is reflected nationally: The number of general surgeons -- those who do appendectomies, cut out cancerous tumors and repair traumatized organs -- has decreased by 26 percent over the last 25 years, according to the Archives of Surgery, a peer-reviewed journal. It's one of the fastest-decreasing disciplines in medicine, according to the same study.

The cause can be traced to a couple of factors. Nationally, the number of residents completing general surgery training after medical school every year hasn't increased since 1980, and the federal government hasn't added any new funding for residencies since 1997. Florida has added just one new general surgery residency in the last 25 years.

Added to that, many of the doctors coming out of these general surgery residencies opt to pursue subspecialties such as transplant surgery that pay better and don't involve intensive on-call duties to rouse them in the middle of the night.

Given those disincentives, Halifax has hired someone who is trying to turn that equation -- less training resources, disappearing income for general surgeons -- completely around. The new approach would remake the culture at Halifax Health and eventually could influence the delivery of health care in this country.

A pie-in-the-sky dream? Not if you listen to local operating room veterans. The hiring of Dr. Bruce Ramshaw -- a general surgeon himself -- to start a general surgery residency program at Halifax has reinvigorated surgeons who have slogged through decades of on-call duty and watched their reimbursement from payers, such as Medicare, decline or fail to keep pace with inflation.

"The next 15 years will be exciting," predicted Dr. Harry Black, 56, a general surgeon at Halifax Health. "It's going to be a huge paradigm shift."

Ramshaw, who previously was chief of general surgery at the University of Missouri School of Medicine, said the problem with medicine in the United States lies in its historic development that has centralized decision-making power in the hands of top hospital administrators and doctors only.

In his vision, a team of professionals -- a design engineer, a doctor, nurses, clinical managers -- take care of the patient together. And no one in the group is called "doctor."

"If you have any status differences (among the team members), you lose the quality of interaction from all the team members," he said, explaining that someone on the team with a lesser title might hesitate to point out to the doctor that the wrong site is being prepared for surgery.

Dr. Pam Carbiener, a Daytona Beach gynecologist who has championed the surgical residency as a member of the Halifax board, said that sort of change would be refreshing.

"It might be hard for certain elderly physicians," she said. "But I have no problem at all with it. When you are the one who is held in the highest esteem, you are not allowed to make a mistake."

Ramshaw said he thinks general surgery is the area ripest for this sort of change because improvement would be so obvious -- and the easiest to implement because there's not much to fight over.

"Reimbursement is so low, turf battles in general surgery are nonexistent," he said.

Ramshaw said he wouldn't have moved his four-person hernia program -- and his idea -- to Halifax were it not for the enthusiastic reception he received during his run as a consultant here.

"We couldn't find a group of surgeons who would commit to this model" as the Halifax physicians have, he said.

Ramshaw hopes to have the first general surgery residents at Halifax before the end of next year, pending the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education's approval of the program to which Halifax has committed \$4 million. He envisions a five-year program that will produce two general surgeons a year beginning in 2016.

Dr. Stephen Levine, who does bariatric surgery at Florida Hospital Memorial Medical Center, said he hopes the general surgery residency will make the same kind of difference that Halifax's family practice residency has already made in this area. Levine, who was an intern with retiring Dr. Dimayuga in Brooklyn, N.Y., gave up taking general surgery calls after years of doing what sometimes left him with 15 days off per year -- including weekends.

"A large number of the best family practice physicians we have were trained at Halifax, coming here as residents," he said. "They learned to love this community and that's been a tremendous thing."

To practice general surgery, he said, "you have to absolutely love it."

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