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Keeping young doctors

By [Maggie Clark](#)

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Dr. Rafael de la Puente is the return on investment that Florida State University and Sarasota Memorial Hospital are banking on.

When the young doctor completed his emergency medicine residency at UMass Memorial Hospital in Worcester, Mass., in 2014, the Florida State University College of Medicine graduate, who'd spent two years of medical school in Sarasota rotating between doctors' offices and local hospitals, felt the pull to return.

He's now an emergency care physician in the emergency department at Sarasota Memorial Hospital, working with the same doctors who helped train him.

Keeping doctors local has tremendous economic benefit. According to an independent study conducted by the research firm IMS Health, every physician supports 12.26 local jobs in addition to their own. Those physicians also each paid an average of \$53,954 in state and local taxes each year, the study found.

The financial benefits, combined with the growing need for physicians in Southwest Florida, are the reasons Sarasota Memorial and the Florida State University College of Medicine are moving ahead with a plan to create a three-year internal medicine residency program to train and retain the next generation of physicians in Southwest Florida.

"Without more residency programs, the physician shortage that Florida is experiencing will only worsen as our population swells and our existing physician workforce retires," said Dr. Steve Taylor, chief medical operations officer for Sarasota Memorial, in a statement.

Not all doctors are willing to move back to the city where they went to medical school. In fact, de la Puente's return to Sarasota is relatively rare among medical students.

According to several national studies, some 80 percent of doctors settle within 50 miles of where they do their post-school residency. With that statistic in mind, local leaders want to make sure they don't lose young doctors when they graduate from medical school and move on to their residency program.

The medical residency, a required step between medical school and licensed medical practice, is when physicians get hands-on training and guidance. After finishing a residency program, which typically lasts two to six years, doctors can become fully licensed physicians or pursue fellowships in more specialized fields.



STAFF PHOTO / MIKE LANG

Dr. Rafael de la Puente graduated from the Sarasota campus of FSU medical school but had to leave to do his residency in emergency medicine because Sarasota doesn't have one. After finishing his residency in Massachusetts, he came back to Sarasota and now works as an ER doctor at Sarasota Memorial Hospital. But he's a rarity. Most doctors settle down where they do their residency. That is why leaders are convinced they need a residency program at Sarasota Memorial and why they're spending millions to make it happen.

"It makes sense that doctors continue to practice near their residency location if you consider the ages of the doctors ? they're in their late 20s, they're getting married and having children and beginning to create their professional networks," said Doug Carlson, director of public affairs for the Florida State University College of Medicine in Tallahassee.

Sarasota Memorial is not the only local hospital working to attract residents, although it will have the only traditional medical doctor residency in the region. Manatee Memorial Hospital offers 30 residency spots each year in internal medicine and family medicine, but only to students pursuing a doctor of osteopathy degree.

Osteopathic doctors are trained to focus on the muscle and skeletal system to diagnose health problems, whereas medical doctors tend to focus on symptoms to diagnose illness.

With an initial seed investment of \$5 million from the Sarasota County Public Hospital Board and commitment from hospital leaders to hire a residency director and other support staff needed to begin the program, the hospital and the medical school hope to build the program to attract 10 new doctors each year to practice alongside Sarasota Memorial physicians.

If the current timeline holds, the new residents could arrive as soon as the summer of 2017.

Strong financial return

In addition to the benefit to the local health system, the financial return on the investment in a residency program is significant, according to national and local studies.

Every dollar spent on the existing medical student program in Sarasota adds about \$1.75 to the local economy, according to a study of the Sarasota program conducted by an independent consultant on behalf of the FSU College of Medicine.

Those calculations are expected to remain the same for the residency program, Carlson said. So the initial \$5 million investment would generate at least \$8.75 million in community benefit.

Much of that money comes from student spending on essentials such as housing, transportation and food.

For instance, in 2010, the 40 medical students at the Sarasota campus added nearly \$1 million to the local economy, according to the FSU analysis.

That same year, the Sarasota campus generated \$5.4 million in economic impact to the Sarasota region, the analysis found.

The economic benefits will undoubtedly grow as the residency program ramps up to its expected capacity of 30 residents per year.

Some young doctors return anyway

Leaders are also betting that existing FSU students will return to the region, like de la Puente did. Even without the residency program, some former medical students are trickling back to the region to start their careers.

Dr. Eilene Weibley, a 2010 graduate of the FSU Sarasota campus, practices family medicine at St. Anthony's Primary Care in St. Petersburg and says that if Sarasota had a residency program when she was a student, she would have applied to stay.

"As a medical resident, you refer patients to many different specialists, and it's much

easier to refer patients to doctors you already know and trust," Weibley said.

"I think there would be a significant percentage of graduating medical students who would choose to stay in Sarasota to do their residencies if they had the option," Weibley said.

Dr. Paula Dees, a 2008 graduate who is now a pediatric hospitalist at All Children's Hospital in St. Petersburg, agrees.

And given the phase of life during which most doctors perform their residency ? their youth, growing families and future real estate needs ? the economic benefit to the community would be substantial, Dees said.

If future young Sarasota medical residents follow in the footsteps of Dr. de la Puente, the investments in the program will likely pay off.

The young doctor recently bought his first home in Sarasota and is encouraging several of his friends from medical school to move back to the area.

He also trains FSU medical students as part of his work in the emergency department.

"I want to give back to what was given to me," de la Puente said.

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