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Surgery program is good news for Volusia

By REMIGIO G. LACSAMANA, M.D., GUEST EDITORIAL



Dr. Remigio Lacsamana

Dr. Lacsamana practiced medicine in Daytona Beach for 33 years before retiring in 2001. He served as president of then-Halifax Medical Center's medical staff and the Volusia Medical Society, and was the editor of the Journal of the Florida Medical Association from 1985 to 1990.

The announcement that Halifax Health will be launching a surgical residency program next year should be welcome news to this community. While it will not solve the current shortage of general surgeons in this area -- whose number has been shrinking gradually -- it will be a wise long-term solution to the projected number we need in the next several years, particularly with the expected increase in the number of patients from the recently passed health care bill by the Obama administration.

If the record of the family practice program at Halifax is any gauge, this new program ought to succeed as well. That program was launched in 1970 with only one resident physician, but gradually got larger to accommodate the current capacity of 24 resident-physicians, in the process becoming one of the most prestigious programs of its kind in the country. In the 1960s, when the current facility was still known as Halifax District Hospital, it had a general practice program that trained a few American doctors, but with most of them foreign medical graduates from Cuba, the Philippines and Central America. Most of those trained in these two programs decided to stay in this area and its environs, which explains why Volusia County, unlike other areas, has no shortage of primary care physicians.

General surgery, however, is something else. Across the country, only slightly more than 1,000 general surgical residents graduate from their training programs every year, 20 percent of them international medical graduates. This number is way off what we need in the context of a population increase that exceeded what was predicted at the time, along with the boomer generation expected to enter the Medicare ranks in a few years.

Furthermore, in the 1990s during the Clinton administration, medical authorities erred in predicting a surplus of physicians. The projection now is a shortage of about 200,000 physicians by 2020, including surgeons, primary care physicians, and certain medical specialists.

Beyond the low pay, the demanding work schedule, and an unfriendly malpractice atmosphere, particularly in Florida, some obstacles have loomed in why there has not been any increase in the number of general surgical residency programs. One of them is the Balanced Budget Act enacted by Congress in 1997, which placed a cap on the number of post-graduate medical programs in this country. Along with this, direct and indirect funding from Medicare to finance these programs dried up, resulting in the closing of some programs and stagnant growth in others. The supply of medical graduates also has remained at 17,000 yearly for many years, with plans now to expand enrollment in existing medical schools by 30 percent, and to establish new ones as we have seen in Florida the past few years.

Daytona Beach is unique in that it has one of the few trauma centers in the state to take care of acutely ill and injured patients. General surgeons are a valued component to the trauma team we have at Halifax. This is one more reason why

it becomes urgent for this community to ensure we have enough general surgeons to keep that trauma center functioning as well as it has done for years.

General surgery has been considered the "primary care" of surgical disciplines. While family practice registered a 10 percent increase this year in its training programs, this is not true for general surgery. This is another reason why we need to support Halifax Health with its commitment of \$4 million to start its own program. Various medical organizations led by the American Medical Association have been lining up as well, urging Congress to increase Medicare funding for residency programs. Just as Daytona Beach has embraced the partnership of Florida State University medical school with Daytona State College, so should we welcome Dr. Bruce Ramshaw -- who was hired to head the new program at Halifax -- to make a new and positive change in the medical community.

The News-Journal has invited a variety of local folks to use this space to share their point of view about our greater community, its challenges, and its opportunities for success.

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