



Lee Memorial Health System ready to recruit

Written by

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10:10 PM, Aug. 8, 2011|

Despite looming budget cuts and ever-declining insurance reimbursements, Lee Memorial Health System is moving forward on a new family medicine residency program that will lose money years before it pays for itself.

It's a leap of faith for a hospital system that believes the program will be a medical necessity for this region's rapidly aging population.

Behind it are two certainties: Residency programs attract doctors to their host communities, and Southwest Florida needs more young doctors.

"We need primary care physicians. Florida is actually exporting physicians today," said Richard Akin, chairman of the system's elected board of directors. "We need them to stay in our community."

The system, in cooperation with the Florida State University College of Medicine, expects to take its first residency applicants next year.

It will begin training six by July 2013 and

up to 18 by 2016. All will specialize in family practice medicine.

System and FSU officials announced the timetable Monday.

Both sides reached a residency deal earlier this year, though the system had been shopping for a medical school residency partner for the past several years.

It settled on FSU because of its focus on geriatrics and rural medicine, Akin said. FSU also has existing health education facilities in Sarasota and Immokalee.

FSU has graduated 450 College of Medicine students since it began accepting students in 2001, including 114 students in May. Almost 70 percent of FSU medical graduates train in out-of-state residency programs.

Newly graduated medical students must complete residency programs in their chosen specialties before they can practice on their own.

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FSU has made creating new residency programs a priority, said Dr. John Fogarty, dean of the FSU College of Medicine.

"This is certainly very very much consistent with our mission of training the kind of doctors Florida really needs," Fogarty said.

Experts believe Florida needs another 12,000 primary care physicians to cope with population growth over the next decade.

The state's physician shortage is worsened by the fact that Florida graduates more medical students than the number of available residency slots.

Not a cheap plan

The new FSU/system residency will be based at Lee Memorial Hospital, though residents are expected to receive hands-on training at a variety of other health facilities and offices in the community.

A number of the community's physicians have expressed an interest in participating, system officials said.

"When you bring medical education into a community it actually makes your medical staff and physician community happier," said Dr. Alma Littles, senior associate dean at the FSU Medical College. "It enhances their professional experience because most physicians actually are teachers at heart as well."

The new program comes at a time of

dramatic cost-cutting within the system. It faces an estimated \$18 million in Medicaid reimbursement cuts next year and likely future reductions in Medicare payments. And the number of patients with private insurance continues to shrink.

And it won't be cheap. The system expects to lose about \$300,000 until year four or five of the program before it breaks even.

Medicare will eventually reimburse the system \$140,000 for each resident. But that amount will likely be cut as Congress pares back federal entitlement spending, system officials predict.

That will leave hospitals and communities in a tough position if the federal government can't come up with new money to train U.S. doctors, said Jim Nathan, system president and CEO.

"The nation still is going to need to produce physicians and somehow they're going to have to be paid for," Nathan said. "It's not all going to be able to be done through

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reserves that we won't have because of other cutbacks that we will have. And it's certainly not going to be done through philanthropy."

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