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Lee Memorial program aims to draw young doctors

Deal calls for six residents

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The ink is drying on a deal for a long-awaited program that aims to bring more doctors to Southwest Florida.

Lee Memorial Health System has contracted with Florida State University for a physician residency program for doctors-in-training.

"We'll be starting small and then growing it," said hospital spokeswoman Mary Briggs.

The program will start with six physicians who will rotate exclusively within the Lee Memorial Health System during the three years of their residency. Afterward, Briggs said, the program may be renewed.

Administrators will start the program, called Graduate Medical Education, this fall by hiring someone to oversee it, and hope to fully launch it by 2013.

At the root of the deal is a looming doctor shortage, which Briggs said is a state and nationwide issue, but is particularly felt here because of the aging population.

Compared to other states, Florida has one of the highest physician shortages because of a limited number of training programs for newly graduated doctors, experts say. Florida has 243 physicians for every 100,000 residents, compared with 267 doctors for every 100,000 nationally, according to the Florida Medical Association.

By 2020, Florida will need an additional 12,000 primary care physicians to cope with population growth, according to the American Academy of Family Physicians.

The average age of Florida physicians is about 50, meaning large numbers will begin to retire over the next decade.

The shortage is particularly pronounced in primary care. Far more medical students train to be specialists because insurance reimbursements for their services tend to be higher.

Family medicine

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Between 1997 and 2005, the number of U.S. medical school graduates becoming family doctors dropped by half, according to a 2008 FSU study.

About 18 percent of FSU medical graduates enter family medicine.

"We really don't have enough residency programs in the state of Florida," said Doug Carlson, spokesman for the FSU College of Medicine. "Generally speaking, doctors locate within 70 to 100 miles of where they did their residencies."

There are no residency programs south of Tampa on the Gulf Coast.

Graduate medical education will likely cost up to \$2 million to start and could lose up to \$1 million annually for the first two years, according to a system analysis.

Lee Memorial will pick up the tab, but Briggs said the program is expected to break even within the first three years.

An FGCU study completed last year showed the program would lead to 340 supporting jobs and \$60 million in annual community spending.

"The hope is we're putting these programs in place to at least get the physicians here," Briggs said. "And who doesn't fall in love with Fort Myers once they're here?"


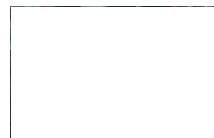
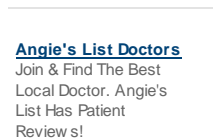
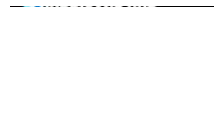


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