

PRESS RELEASE

Former College of Medicine Dean Recognized for Improving Rural Health

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By Meredith Fraser

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*Ocie Harris, M.D.*

Long known for his commitment to increasing access to health care for residents of rural communities, former Florida State University College of Medicine Dean J. Ocie Harris is being recognized for his efforts. Harris has been selected to receive the National Rural Health Association's 2009 Distinguished Educator Award. Harris, who retired as dean of the medical school in August and remains on the faculty as a professor of clinical sciences, will formally accept his award during the association's Annual Rural Health Conference May 7 in Miami Beach. The NRHA award committee cited "the scope of his accomplishments in medical education, the significance of his work in rural health, the innovation and originality in scholarly effort, and successful rural health outcomes." "It is certainly a great honor to be recognized by a national organization that I'd been involved with for a number of years," said Harris, who held leadership positions in rural health education programs for more than 20 years. "The scope of his accomplishments and the significance of his work in rural health have impacted thousands of lives and will continue to impact the future for generations to come," said Alan Morgan, chief executive officer of the NRHA. During his tenure as dean, Harris oversaw many significant developments, including the process that garnered the college full accreditation from the Liaison Committee on Medical Education in February 2005. Harris played a major role in the development of the college's system of regional campuses and its rural health mission -- an undertaking that has produced positive results. "Rural communities have a lot of challenges in terms of getting access to just basic health care and services, and I think medical schools and health profession education programs certainly have an obligation to consider those issues and to do what they can to help rural communities address them," Harris said. "So by this college establishing medical education programs in rural communities, we've helped these communities enhance their medical care." One of the primary goals of the college has been to recruit and educate medical professionals specifically to serve Florida's rural population, a mission that requires a thorough understanding of rural populations and their medical needs. "I've tried to be a voice to make sure that we followed through and developed rural health programs, that we did them well and that we got good outcomes from it," Harris said. Harris' leadership in organizing those programs proved invaluable. Through his past connections and experience in rural North Florida medical environments, he was able to ensure that the college's rural health

curriculum would eventually benefit Florida's underserved farming communities. "You have to work hard and long to get something to happen, but it does happen along the way," he said. "And it's very gratifying when it does."