

PRESS RELEASE

Rural Community Growing Its Own Doctors

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By Nancy Kinnally

TALLAHASSEE, Fla.- Known mostly for raising timber, the town of Perry, Fla., population 7,000, is proving that with the right approach, rural communities can also grow their own doctors.

With full scholarships from Doctors' Memorial Hospital in Perry, three Florida State University medical students are setting out to do something no one else from their hometown has done in 50 years – earn a medical degree and return to Perry to practice.

Joda Lynn, a third-generation Perry native, was the first student admitted to the FSU College of Medicine. Lynn will graduate in 2005, followed in 2006 by Shannon Price and in 2007 by Josef Plum, who recently began his first semester.

Doctors' Memorial Hospital CEO Jim McKnight said the hospital is investing about \$60,000 per student over four years of medical school. In return, the students will be obligated to practice in Perry for at least four years.

Perry is located in Taylor County, one of 21 Florida counties that are federally designated as medically underserved, primarily due to a lack of physicians. Local voters passed a 1-cent sales tax in 1999 to build a state-of-the-art 48-bed replacement hospital, which opened two weeks ago.

"If you're in hospital administration, you have to solve your problems today and make the bottom line come out, but we took a more long-term approach to solving those problems, and that was to recruit our own, train our own, and bring them back here," McKnight said.

"It makes a lot of sense because currently we spend anywhere from \$200,000 to \$300,000 to recruit a physician, and in some cases they stay three or four years and they leave. We can educate four medical students for that amount of dollars."

For Lynn, the scholarship will make it easier for him to pursue the goal he'd already set out for himself – to practice medicine in his hometown.

"I think it's going to be like a domino effect for other hospitals in the state in small towns and rural communities to start up similar programs," Lynn said.

"What can be better than helping the people in your community, and then in return for doing that, they're going to come back and help make that community better? I think it's a good investment for the hospital to bring in good physicians, and a good investment for the community to ensure the quality of their health care in the future."

Dr. J. Ocie Harris, dean of the FSU College of Medicine, hopes more rural hospitals around the state recognize the cost-effectiveness of funding local medical students, as opposed to paying dearly to recruit doctors who may or may not like the small-town lifestyle.

“Our mission is to educate physicians who will work with medically underserved populations,” Harris said. “That’s why partnerships with institutions like Doctors’ Memorial Hospital are so important to us, and why we’d like to see others follow their lead.”

Perry native and retired physician Dr. John H. Parker, who celebrated his 50th medical school reunion recently at Tulane, and who was Lynn’s childhood doctor, set up his practice in Perry in 1954. Every other physician who has practiced there since then has come from somewhere else.

Parker knows first-hand how hard it is to recruit young physicians, having participated in efforts to bring doctors to Perry in the 1960s and ‘70s.

“We’ve had (medical students) go, but not come back,” Parker said. He thinks it’s about time local medical students followed in his footsteps.

“It was overdue, you could modestly put it,” Parker said.