Viewpoint: FSU medical students are having an impact

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Yogi Berra once said, "When you come to a fork in the road … take it."

Thankfully, the people who founded the Florida State University College of Medicine recognized the fork in the road for medical education. They avoided traveling the same old path when designing the nation's first new medical school in a quarter-century.

That fork in the road led to Pensacola, and to other Florida communities.

Most people get their health care from physicians in the town where they live. FSU's approach to medical education is surprisingly novel: put students where people are treated.

For 10 years now, physicians in Pensacola and surrounding communities have generously and expertly taken on the additional role of teacher, providing clinical education instruction for FSU medical students. Patients in this community, too, are teachers, providing access to lessons that can't be taught in a classroom.

Our medical school's founders recognized that we have a great need in Florida.

As someone who was in full-time private practice here until 1999, I observed what they did: not enough primary care physicians; not enough physicians to care for our expanding geriatric population; and not enough physicians serving our rural communities.

The question was whether anything could be done about it.

Medical schools in this country have done things pretty much the same way for more than a half-century. The result is that after spending four years inside an academic medical center or teaching hospital, most medical students follow what they have seen inside those walls and become specialists. Fewer and fewer of them have been choosing to provide primary care, or to work in rural communities or other underserved populations.

By placing students out where most people seek medical attention, the FSU College of Medicine is exposing them to the community's greatest health-care needs and showing them in vivid detail the role local physicians play in the health and well-being of their patients.

We were fortunate when we opened our Pensacola Regional Campus in 2003. All of the area's hospitals supported our plan and became our affiliates, allowing FSU medical students to work with physicians seeing their patients. More than 50 local physicians also signed up at that time to teach, and most of those are still on our faculty.

Today, more than 300 physicians from Cantonment to Crestview and throughout our part of the Panhandle have joined the Pensacola campus faculty.

To date, nearly 70 percent of FSU College of Medicine graduates practicing in Florida are in primary care. As we have heard recently, more primary care in Pensacola will go a long way toward addressing the health-care disparities that exist here.

In addition, all graduates of this medical school are better prepared to care for older patients and our students' academic performance on required standardized exams has been outstanding.

To boot, our economic impact in the Pensacola area has been estimated at around $5 million a year.

As more of our students graduate, more and more of them are coming back to practice full time in Pensacola, along with the new physicians our medical school has provided in Crestview, Miramar Beach, Panama City, Blountstown, Bonifay and Marianna.

I take comfort knowing that by taking a fork in the road, the FSU College of Medicine found one part of the solution to the health care crisis facing our state and country.

Ten years in Pensacola is just a beginning. A wonderful, highly effective beginning to an experiment in medical education that is producing the intended results.