COM-P Physician Gives Students Hands-On Experience in Rural Health

College of Medicine ? Phoenix
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Dr. Judith Hunt's classroom is in Payson, about 90 miles northeast of the downtown Phoenix Biomedical Campus [1].

She not only trains UA College of Medicine ? Phoenix students in rural health, but she welcomes them into her home so they can really experience the life of a small-town physician.

"The best part of rural medicine is the care of the community," Hunt said. "There is nothing that I would trade for being able to see a baby that I helped care for throughout the years, now married with their own children. It's just amazing to be a part of that young person's life all the way through."

Hunt has been practicing medicine and training medical students and residents in the rural community of Payson for nearly 22 years. She is a clinical assistant professor of internal medicine and pediatrics in the College of Medicine ? Phoenix and is site director for the college's Certificate of Distinction in Rural Health Professions Program.

Banner Payson Medical Center is the only hospital in Payson, serving a population of about 15,000. Hunt, who is board-certified in internal medicine, pediatrics and adolescent medicine, was the first pediatrician in Payson. She sees more than 60 patients a week, from newborns to centenarians.

To add to her busy schedule, Hunt also trains medical students who rotate into the Payson hospital.

"My patients are my friends and my neighbors," Hunt said. "The children I care for in my practice are children I coached on swim team, and I was there when many of these patients were born. Students immediately notice this relationship that we have with our patients. Not often in Phoenix will a doctor leave their clinic and meet their patient outside of the practice. Here, we meet our patients in grocery stores, in parks, on the sports field and at church."

Each year, Hunt trains about 15 health professions students and residents from across the country, including the College of Medicine ? Phoenix, the University of Tennessee System, Marquette University and the University of Southern California.

"Rural medicine is a specialty in itself," Hunt said. "It allows students to begin to see themselves in a rural area. The country has a big challenge in finding physicians for rural areas and until a student has experienced living in a rural community and experienced rural medicine, it's going to be difficult for just a lecture to really paint a picture of what it is really like to be a rural doctor."
To address the physician shortage and increase the number of graduates who practice in rural settings, the college started a Certificate of Distinction in Rural Health Professions Program. Hunt trains many of the students who participate in the certificate program.

The program, led by Dr. Jonathan Cartsonis, allows students to engage with diverse rural communities in Arizona and the Southwest. Students complete up to six months of training in Prescott, Payson or Yuma or on the Navajo Nation Reservation.

"One in 10 physicians practice rural medicine, even though 2 in 10 Arizonans live in a rural setting," Cartsonis said. "Rural populations experience more chronic diseases like diabetes, cancer and heart disease. This is related to the fact that more elderly are living in rural communities than urban. Students need to know this. As a medical school, we have the obligation to train physicians all over the state and where they are most needed."

Students accepted into the program follow a four-year course of preparation and complete a four-week rural pre-clinical experience between their first and second years, as well as a 15-week rural clerkship during their third year.

Hunt is currently working with Julia Nguyen, a second-year medical student in the program.

"I had the wonderful opportunity to stay with Hunt, a beloved and valued member of this community," Nguyen said. "I loved every single moment of it."

She said she believed the certificate program "will open up my eyes to many more problems that still exist in rural regions. I hope that these experiences will help me become a better physician in the future."

Students become part of the community during their rural rotations. They complete outpatient and inpatient rotations with Hunt and other physicians in Payson, live with Hunt and her family during their rotations, participate in community events and help coach after-school programs, such as soccer.

"Dr. Hunt and I agree that there is nothing better than hands-on training," Cartsonis said. "It's one thing to watch a PowerPoint about rural parts of Arizona that have no electricity or even water, but it's a whole different experience to work around barriers with patients who live in those circumstances. Under the one-on-one guidance of preceptors like Dr. Hunt, students appreciate rural health challenges and become adept at finding workarounds. They get out of the urban bubble and challenge themselves."

Students in the Rural Health Professions Program return from their rural rotations changed for the better, Cartsonis said.

"Dr. Hunt loves what she does ? taking care of patients and teaching students," he said. "She understands that her community depends on her and also knows she will not be able to practice medicine forever. She wants to ensure that patients will be in the hands of a new generation of equally dedicated, well-trained physicians."

A version of this article originally appeared on the College of Medicine ? Phoenix website.

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