Compassion is Lesson No. 1 for Incoming Medical Students

College of Medicine ? Tucson
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Before the College of Medicine ? Tucson [1]'s newest class could begin learning to practice medicine, faculty ensured they walked in their future patients' shoes with a weeklong orientation designed to instill the importance of empathy, respect and compassion.

"Medicine isn't all science; there is a human piece," said Dr. Andreas Theodorou, professor of pediatrics. "Health care is a caring field."

All 124 first-year medical students learned this lesson firsthand during the orientation from July 23-27 as they faced challenges such as drafting their own living wills, an often burdensome task for patients who struggle with legalese or technology. They also briefly experienced what it's like for patients who lack income or reliable transportation.

Divided into four groups of up to 35, students traveled via public transit for Community Day on July 25. The day of service saw students volunteering in Tucson's underserved communities and for organizations that focus on decreasing health disparities, food insecurity and homelessness.

Many of the students had taken a city bus before. But for some, it allowed them to see that buses don't always arrive on time, said Dr. Paul Gordon, professor of family and community medicine.

"Doctors can be cruel when patients are late. They may punish those who are late for appointments," Gordon said.

The students who were led by Gordon packed medical kits, animal food and stuffed envelopes at the Southern Arizona AIDS Foundation.

Other groups of students gardened at Easterseals Blake Foundation, an organization that serves people with disabilities, packed donated food at the Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona, and picked up trash along the streets of South Tucson ? a 1.2-square mile city where many residents struggle to make a living wage.

"Almost 17 years ago, I directly benefited from health care outreach programs, community centers and social support networks as a homeless pregnant teen," said Maria Williams, a first-year medical student who participated in Community Day. "I would not have been able to get myself on track to college without these resources for myself and my infant son."

She added, "I am passionate to give back and contribute to the supportive forces helping empower individuals in our community."
Prior to leaving for their designated community sites, the students prepared their lunches for the day: peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. This contrasted with the catered meals they enjoyed during much of orientation week.

"Making their own food shows them that others don't have the same luxury of receiving catered meals," said Kristie Bowen, director of student affairs and a research assistant professor of family and community medicine.

Dr. Patricia Lebensohn, professor of family and community medicine, has directed Community Day for the past four years. Under her guidance, the day of service was integrated into the college's curriculum.

Teaching humanism and social determinants of health to first-year medical students is necessary for them to become the best physicians possible, Lebensohn said.

During the final days of orientation, the new students put together a mission statement that reflected what they had learned during the week's lessons on compassion in medicine.

The students collectively read the statement aloud at the White Coat Ceremony [2] on July 27. There they also received and donned their first white coats as a symbol of their acceptance and entry into medical school.

With their new white coats, medical students officially began their journey at the College of Medicine ? Tucson.

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