Cooking Up a New Way to Teach Medical Students About Nutrition

College of Medicine ? Phoenix
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Medical students at the College of Medicine ? Phoenix are stepping out of the classroom and into the kitchen to learn how nutrition can improve the lives of their patients.

Under the guidance of a professional chef, the student-led Culinary Medicine Interest Group recently held a class at the Wesley Community and Health Center kitchen in south Phoenix to teach medical students cooking skills to make healthy meals.

The classes were organized by second-year students Julie Tran and Tyler Bien, and Farshad Fani Marvasti, director of the public health, prevention and health promotion curricular theme.

"The overall goal of this initiative is to become part of an integrative medicine program at Wesley, serving patients and empowering them to manage their diseases through nutrition and cooking education," Tran said.

Another goal, Bien said, is to "bring some much-needed attention and help students realize how cooking and healthy eating should be included in patient care."

Despite what is known about dietary risk factors, Marvasti said, medical schools teach an average of only 19 hours of nutrition throughout all four years, resulting in a poor understanding of nutrition by most physicians in practice.

"Therefore, redesigning medical education to enhance and expand nutrition in our curriculum through these experiences is critical to developing a new generation of physicians who can give their patients food prescriptions in the care and prevention of their medical conditions," he said.

The Wesley Community and Health Center is part of the college's Community Health Initiative ? Phoenix, a program in which medical students demonstrate their commitment to serving the greater Phoenix area and bettering overall community health. The opportunities at Wesley allow students to provide care to uninsured and underserved populations.

Twelve medical students cooked various recipes under the direction of Jennifer Caraway, founder of the Joy Bus Diner. They made a Mediterranean salad with garbanzo beans, feta, cucumber, tomatoes and almonds paired with roasted squash and broccoli.

The Joy Bus is a nonprofit organization that prepares locally sourced, healthy meals and delivers them to cancer patients. Caraway donated her time, knowledge and some fresh produce from local farms for the cooking session.

"It is a brilliant idea and very much needed within the medical community," Caraway said. "I
hope students realize the healing power of food. Not only can 'real' food heal the body, it can nourish the soul."

Bien and Tran hope to start student-led cooking classes with patients later this year.

"There is an increasing recognition that medical students and physicians are lacking in their nutrition training and knowledge," Bien said. "We want this to be an experience that further opens the door to the exploration of healthy food and nutrition as a crucial part of patient care. By bringing our students and patients together in a cooking class, everyone benefits. Students not only gain cooking skills and nutrition knowledge, but they will be working with patients to manage their health in a unique, fun way."

Tran and Bien received a grant from the college's Office of Diversity and Inclusion to support their efforts. The funds allow the group to buy ingredients and rent the space for at least three more sessions.

"The funding will help us further gauge student interest and may open up future possibilities of other educational resources, such as pamphlets, podcasts or video tutorials on nutrition and how to appropriately use food as medicine," Tran said.

"The field of culinary medicine is a growing phenomenon in medical education," Marvasti said, adding that there are plans to partner with more local food vendors, chefs and farmers.

The students said they feel fortunate to be working with so many passionate people who want to make this idea a reality, and appreciate the support of the Office of Diversity and Inclusion.

"We are excited about healthy eating and hope to keep growing this effort," Tran said.

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

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