Rural Scholars Programs Help Meet Need for More Rural Doctors

Alabama has a critical shortage of rural primary care physicians. Rural students are more likely to live and practice in rural areas.

- Programs to recruit rural students into medical and health careers and other rural health initiatives have been developed at The University of Alabama to help rural students become physicians.
- The Rural Health Leaders Pipeline is a series of programs created at UA whose goal is finding and nurturing capable rural students who are interested in becoming physicians and practicing in their hometowns or similar rural areas of our state.
- These programs are conducted by UA's College of Community Health Sciences (CCHS) and the University of Alabama School of Medicine as part of the "Pipeline" to identify, nurture, and assist rural students who can return to rural Alabama as primary care physicians and health practitioners.
- The "pipeline" also incorporates summer field work and rural research options for students at all levels including rural rotations for medical students and physicians in the CCHS family practice residency.

**HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS:** The Rural Health Scholars Program, a 5-week summer program for 11th graders, was set up in 1993 to encourage rural high school students to consider careers in medicine and health professions and let them experience college first-hand. Since 1993, 471 Rural Health Scholars from 66 counties in Alabama have attended, producing 34 medical students or medical school graduates and 20 who have entered other health professions including nursing, dentistry, pharmacy, optometry, physical therapy, and others. Contact: Cynthia Moore, cmoore@cchs.ua.edu

**MINORITY STUDENTS:** The Minority Rural Health Pipeline Program (MRHPP) was initiated in 2001 in an effort to increase the number of minority students from rural Alabama who qualify for admission to medical school, especially through admission to The University of Alabama Rural Medical Scholars Program (RMSP). High school graduates attend MRHPP in the summer after graduation, preparing for college life and health careers. The Minority Health Scholars take college courses while learning to study, manage their time, and ne their test-taking skills. They participate in field trips and attended special lectures on rural health needs. Of 98 Minority Rural Health Scholars to date (2-2011) coming from 33 counties, predominantly from the Black Belt, 97 have entered college, and one joined the U.S. Navy. Nine have entered medicine, one dentistry, 4 nursing, and one pharmacy. Contact: Cynthia Moore.

**PREMED COLLEGE & GRADUATES STUDENTS:** The Rural Medical Scholars Program accepts ten college seniors and graduate students in the year before they start medical school, and they begin the program with a premed year at The University of Alabama studying rural community health and issues in primary care, interacting with rural preceptors, and making farm field trips to learn first hand the problems faced by rural patients. To date [February, 2011], 154 students from 52 counties in Alabama have entered RMSP. It takes a minimum of 7 years for students to complete medical school and residency to become primary care physicians, so many RMSs are still in training. While fewer medical students nationally are choosing primary care practices, especially in rural areas, the numbers are different for Rural Medical Scholars: half are family medicine physicians; 60 percent are in practice in small, rural Alabama communities; 70 percent are in the primary care fields of family medicine, pediatrics and internal medicine; More than 90 percent have entered practice in Alabama after residency training.

- So far, 84 have graduated from medical school. (Others are still in medical school or post-graduate training.)
- Forty-six have also completed residency.
- Forty practice in Alabama.
- 34 practice in 21 rural Alabama counties.
- The economic impact of these physicians exceeds $141 million.
- This year's 2010-11 Rural Medical Scholars are the fifteenth RMSP class to enter the program. Rural Medical Scholars now comprise a significant portion of every class in medical school and in the family practice residency at CCHS. Rural Medical Scholars are successful academically and are chosen for leadership roles by classmates every year. Contact: Irene Wallace, iwallace@cchs.ua.edu

Together these three programs create a pipeline which is full from the eleventh grade through residency training. Each year approximately 25 high school Rural Health Scholars, 15 college-level Minority Rural Health Scholars, and 10 Rural Medical Scholars are added to the pipeline. Students growing up in any of the rural areas of the state are eligible to apply to these programs.

The data show that these programs are working. Family physicians are the doctors most likely to choose rural practice, according to data compiled on rural physician distribution. The first ten classes of Rural Medical Scholars (RMSs) have graduated from medical school and have chosen specialty training. About 40% of RMSs have chosen Family Medicine training compared to 6% of their classmates at the University of Alabama School of Medicine.

The University of Alabama School of Medicine is now ranked in the Top Fifteen Rural Medicine programs in U.S. News and World Report listing of “America’s Best Graduate Schools, 2009.” The only Department of Rural Medicine in UASOM is in Tuscaloosa’s branch campus at The University of Alabama College of Community Health Sciences (CCHS), where Rural Scholars Programs are making an impact.

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