

Caring for rural health

CMU provides remedies for nationwide physician shortage

By Dan Digmann

Close your eyes, and the buzz of conversation filling the room is akin to that of breakfast time in a downtown diner. Laughter accents the hypnotic hum of voices incidentally brought together this Monday morning.

Open your eyes, and you see that you're in the waiting room of the East Jordan Family Health Center located on the edge of this small town nearly 20 minutes southwest of Charlevoix, Michigan. This center has offered quality health services since 1976 after the community came together and raised funds to bring a physician to their town, which today has about 2,400 residents.

But not all of the patients in the room today are waiting to see a physician. They're here to see physician assistant Sam Dyste, a 2007 graduate of CMU's nationally recognized physician assistant program.

Among his patients this morning, Dyste will treat a child with an eye infection, wrap a girl's broken ankle, and provide consultation to a woman coping with a loss in her family.

Dan McKinnon, the center's executive director, has participated in national studies assessing health care availability, quality, cost, and patient satisfaction. He favors the training of physician assistants and is a proponent of CMU's program.

"We were among the early adopters of the physician/physician assistant team concept," says McKinnon, who graduated from CMU in 1985 with a business degree. "It took some time for the physicians to accept this model, but they since have embraced it. After overcoming the resistance of the physicians, we turned to them to educate and convince their patients that treatment from a P.A. is not a lower level of care.

"In 15 years, this model has proven to be very successful here."

Doctor decline hitting rural areas hardest

Cities throughout the state and nation are responding to the projected decline in the number of physicians. The Association of American Medical Colleges predicts a 20 percent shortage of physicians by 2020. Factors include the increasing number of physician retirements and the aging baby-boomer generation needing increased services.

Smaller communities are among the first feeling the effects of this pending physician shortage. Such towns traditionally lack the cultural diversity, current medical resources, and opportunities for family members that would attract new and established physicians.

But East Jordan is perfectly sized for Dyste and his wife, Melissa, who is a special education teacher in nearby Elk Rapids. The northern Michigan area enables Dyste, a Midland native, to enjoy scenic bike rides, kayaking, and fly-fishing. He also helps coach the middle school basketball team.

"I'm not sacrificing anything coming to a rural community," he says. "It really is a great town."

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East Jordan Family Health Center

"Every patient is a new challenge," says Dyste, who generally sees around 20 patients each day. "I try to make each person feel like they're my only patient that day."

Having a P.A. on staff is among the ways the center can continue to provide its patients quality health care.

Sam Dyste has found it easy to settle in as a physician assistant in East Jordan (est. pop. 2,400). Working closely with medical professionals at the East Jordan Family Health Center – including Cathy Miller, shown here – the 2007 graduate of the CMU physician assistant program is doing his part to provide quality health care in this northern Michigan community.

Dyste credits the physician assistant program at CMU – which is dedicated to delivering primary care to individuals in rural and underserved areas – with preparing him to work in a small community.

In addition to its rural location, nearly 75 percent of the patients at the East Jordan center either are underinsured or receiving assistance through Medicare or Medicaid.

The center strives to provide affordable health care and has developed a sliding fee discount program for its patients based on income and family size.

“Financial concerns are huge for many of my patients,” Dyste says. “It’s one of those things where they have to choose between buying groceries or paying for a needed C.T. scan. With that, we have to do what we can to help them.”

This is why patient education is such a vital component of Dyste’s position at this rural clinic.

“A large part of my job is to help patients to take better care of themselves,” he says. “I’m just trying to fill the gap here so people in this town have access to quality health care.”

This essentially is the goal of the CMU physician assistant program, according to Dr. Ahmad Hakemi, director of the program that began in 1988.

“We teach them to be ready,” Hakemi says.

“Our physician assistants are filling the need for health care professionals. We are doing our little bit to help with the health care shortage in Michigan.”

To date the physician assistant program at CMU has more than 500 graduates, many of whom, like Sam Dyste, stay in Michigan and work in rural or underserved areas.

While Hakemi says the program is doing “a little bit” to remedy the shortage of physicians in Michigan, numbers like these indicate it’s helping the state in a big way. •



CMU to establish school of medicine

Citing CMU’s responsibility to help prepare Michigan for an impending shortage of 6,000 physicians by 2020, the CMU Board of Trustees has decided to establish a school of medicine.

CMU currently is finalizing clinical affiliation agreements, developing a curriculum for the program, and seeking proposals for an addition to the Health Professions Building. The university anticipates enrolling its inaugural class of 100 future doctors of medicine as early as fall 2011.

“Our vision is for a rurally focused medical school that will serve the future health care needs of 2 million people in a very, very large geographic region in central and northern Michigan and the Upper Peninsula,” says CMU President Michael Rao.

Extensive feasibility studies have demonstrated CMU’s strengths in the basic sciences, library resources, and instructional technology, coupled with well-established programs in both The Herbert H. And Grace A. Dow College of Health Professions and the College of Science and Technology. •

Get a P.A., stat!

In 2007 graduates of the CMU physician assistant program, including Dyste, earned the university a perfect 100 percent first-time pass rate on the national Physician Assistant National Certification Examination.

Here’s a quick look at some numbers for the university’s P.A. program:

1988

Program founded

More than 80 percent
Students working in rural or underserved areas

100 percent ←
Program class of 2007’s job placement rate and national certifying examination pass rate

500-plus

Program graduates through 2008

More than 500

Clinical site rotations arranged each year

At least 100,000

Annual student/patient encounters

