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Good meds

UC's Urban Health Project puts medical students in positions to serve the underserved

By Amy Howell

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Medical students entering their second year at the University of Cincinnati have been told again and again that this is their last "real" summer. Next year, the 155 doctors-in-training will study for the first step of the U.S. Medical Licensing Examination. After that, they'll juggle year-round rotations and exams before starting 80-hour-per-week residency programs.

But rather than take much-needed breaks or pursue research interests, 21 students from the College of Medicine's incoming second-year class spent their summer vacation in busy public clinics, cramped health care vans and old buildings cooled mostly by oscillating fans.

"I figured now's the time to figure out what I really want to do," says Alan Wang, who worked in the obstetrics and gynecology clinic at the Elm Street Health Center in Over-the-Rhine.

Through the college's Urban Health Project, now in its 22nd year, med students who have completed their first year of study can apply to be matched with non-profit health and social service clinics throughout Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky. The student-run program raises funds to pay each intern a modest stipend, depending on available funding (\$3,000 this summer).

"Each site gets free help for eight weeks, and each intern gets the opportunity to work with the local underserved community," says Lauren Simendinger, co-director with Jessica Sisto of this summer's program. "Our hope is that medical students will remember their experiences and (someday) incorporate them into their medical practice."

True to the program's mission, the interns helped deliver health education and services to people who included abused women and children and uninsured seniors with chronic health problems - and took home lessons they can't pick up from a textbook.

"People want help, but don't always seek it. But once you reach out to them, they're very open," says Wang, who provided nutrition counseling for pregnant women.

Although many patients never had heard of the nutrient folic acid, they were eager to hear what foods would increase its intake after Wang explained its importance.

Like Wang, intern Erin Becka quickly saw that a patient's lack of knowledge is not the same as a lack of willingness to learn.

"I learned that women are very interested in their health, despite the situation they're in," says Becka, who worked at Welcome House of Northern Kentucky.

The 25 to 35 homeless women living at the Covington shelter suggested many of the activities that Becka planned - including yoga on Wednesday and Friday mornings and a lunch-time discussion on the human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine.

"A resident's doctor had mentioned it to her (for her child), and she had no idea what he was talking about," Becka says.

Mikell Boggs, a med student who hopes to go into neonatology, relished the opportunity to shadow pediatricians at the St. Luke Hospitals, where she interned for the Health Ministry program. But through her time at the Hosea House, an evening-meal site for the homeless in Newport, Boggs learned that listening sometimes can be as healing as medical care.

"Just taking their blood pressure, it might make their day, to show them someone cares about them," Boggs says.

The interns also got an up-close look at the harsh realities of today's health care environment.

"You definitely get an understanding of the restraints of health care," Becka says.

Most of the women at the Welcome House, who live at the shelter for a couple days to several months, rely on public clinics for health care and have to arrive a half-hour early and wait in line to see a doctor, Becka says.

Mark Stephens, an intern at the Tender Mercies shelter for homeless people with mental or emotional illness, helped residents get medical attention for everything from athlete's foot to diabetes and high blood pressure, and he gave weekly presentations on topics such as psychotherapy drugs.

He also got a taste of the challenges and frustrations of being a doctor.

"We can talk about substance abuse, but then any time of day they can go across the street and get anything they desire," Stephens says of residents' accessibility to drugs. "For each step forward, you feel like you fall back five."

Despite the challenges, there were moments when the interns knew they were making a difference - and were reminded why they want to become doctors.

Becka arranged mammograms for women who had never had the exam, and baby-sat children so moms could go to job interviews.

Wang saw patients achieve a healthy pregnancy weight after taking his advice to eat more dairy or exercise more.

Stephens, after searching for weeks, found a clinic where a homeless woman could get a free physical exam in order to receive Social Security assistance.

"It's not all about medicine, it's not all about the drugs," Stephens says. "It's about health and this gut-wrenching compassion."
