

## M.D. students champion high value care through the STARS Program

Before starting medical school, Hunter Niehus, a fourth-year M.D. student, worked as a medical scribe at an outpatient clinic in Eugene, Ore., where he says he got to see firsthand how medical costs burdened patients, and ultimately, how they became a significant barrier to receiving appropriate treatment.

*“I helped patients fill out paperwork for financial assistance programs and got to see the numbers, such as how much of a person's income was going to the medications they needed to be functional,” says Niehus. “While some things like the prices of medications and tests are outside an individual doctor's control, we do have the power to choose the highest-value tests and treatments for our patients and to think critically about the whole person in front of us, including how medical bills will affect their life.”*

During his first week of medical school, he attended a lecture by Anne Smeraglio, M.D., associate professor of medicine, OHSU School of Medicine, and director of health systems science for the OHSU Internal Medicine Residency Program.

“She taught our class about the difference between cost and value, and told us about the Choosing Wisely program,” says Niehus. “I felt the values of STARS aligned with my own, and was really thrilled to be accepted.”

Part of the national Choosing Wisely movement, STARS—Students and Trainees Advocating for Resource Stewardship—is a program that aims to catalyze grassroots, student-led initiatives to advance high-value health care in medical education.

STARS got its start in 2017; that same year, Dr. Smeraglio formed a STARS chapter at the OHSU School of Medicine. At the start of each school year, she calls for applications from first-year M.D. students; two are selected to attend the national STARS conference later that year and develop a project that they work on for the rest of their time in medical school.

Dr. Smeraglio defines high value health care as “delivering exceptional care that is also affordable by cutting waste and following guidelines for tests and treatments.”

*“We have good data that show high health care costs have negative outcomes,” says Dr. Smeraglio. “Bankruptcy is a real thing. Patients who come from impoverished backgrounds or who are in underrepresented groups are most affected by cost. They skip care and skip medications. When you look at high value care through an equity lens, it's not just the smart thing to do, it's the right thing to do for vulnerable populations.”*

She adds, “High value care is the best care. This should be a core value of all doctors. With STARS, we develop change agents who are focused on educational curriculum and practice style improvements.”

Sruthi Eapen is working on a curricular change project with Aylmer Tan, both second-year M.D. student and STARS members.

“The project involves creating clinical informatics we call, ‘Pearls,’ which are 5 to 10 minute videos for first-year medical students on how to utilize resources to inform high-value care medical decision-

making,” Eapen explains. “We supplemented this with a gamified clinical skills lab, where students were provided with a sample patient case and worked in teams to determine the best treatment plan at the lowest cost.”

*She adds, “The goal is to change the culture of medical decision-making to include high-value care. Therefore, we made interventions at a medical student level, which will hopefully allow students to carry these lessons on throughout their careers.”*

Eapen and Tan submitted their project idea to the national High-Value Care Conference (HVCCC) and won the “Student Value Challenge Bright Ideas Award.” They also both won an Outstanding Medical Student Scholarship based on their work implementing high value care curriculum.

Hunter Niehus and fellow STARS member and fourth-year M.D. student Ali Gunesch are running a multi-center national survey to identify factors that affect medical student attitudes towards high value care and are working towards publication. They presented their idea as a poster at the 2022 HVCCC conference and won the “STARS Student Excellence Award.”

The school’s M.D. Program supports the STARS program with a \$1,000 award to each student their first year to fund conference travel costs and other incidentals.

Niehus will be starting residency in internal medicine at OHSU this summer and is considering a subspecialty career. “One of the best parts of STARS is that all doctors in all specialties can be good stewards of our health care resources, and these skills and habits can be useful in any setting, be it an operating room, ambulatory clinic, house calls, an ICU, ER, or hospital ward,” says Niehus. “Wherever I end up, I’m excited to find ways to work with patients to provide appropriate high-value, cost-conscious care.”

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