

Family Medicine Students Help Create Rural Buzz on OHSU Campus



In 2013 the Oregon Legislative Assembly created the Scholars for a Healthy Oregon Initiative to tackle the burden of student debt due to high tuition costs while attempting to address the physician workforce shortage in rural and underserved communities across the state. Through this initiative, the state provides funding for student tuition and fees for approximately six medical students (as well as 30+ nursing students, PAs and dental students) who agree to practice in an OHSU-approved rural or underserved site for a given period upon completion of their program.

Three recipients of this funding, **Nick West**, **Emily Thompson**, and **Abbie Huddleston**, all OHSU MD19 candidates, knew they would be practicing in a rural community upon graduation, but wondered what they could do now to create more of a rural presence on their metro campus. That's where Paul Gorman, MD, Assistant Dean for Rural Medical Education, stepped in. When Emily Thompson asked, "How can we promote the idea of practicing in a rural setting to other students on campus?" Dr. Gorman allowed the trio to dream big. What came out of these discussions was the creation of the Student Rural Advisory Group and the Rural Medicine Discovery Program (RMDP). According to Gorman, "I was thrilled when Abbie, Emily, and Nick showed up in my office offering their help. With their input we are able to combine high level commitment in the School of Medicine, from the Dean on down, with an authentically rural perspective that will help us get it right."

Open to all first- and second-year students, the Student Rural Advisory Group came up with a three-day program that encourages students interested in all specialties – Family Medicine, General Surgery, Urology, Internal Medicine or Emergency Medicine – to explore the possibilities of living and working in a rural community. Questions such as, "What's there to do here?" "What kind of jobs are available for my significant other?" and "How do the local schools measure up?" are all answered honestly and thoughtfully.

The first Rural Medicine Discovery Program took place at the OHSU South Coast Campus for Rural Health in Coos Bay in the fall of 2015. Since then groups of students have visited northeast Oregon including the cities of Heppner, La Grande and Pendleton; the north coast, including Seaside and Astoria; and central Oregon, including Prineville, Redmond and Madras. The program has been so well received that the new first year students have continued the program, completing their first visit to Coos Bay this past fall, and each event has a waiting list of up to 15 or so students.

During the new curriculum's scheduled enrichment weeks, students who take part in the RMDP are paired with providers based on their specialty of interest for a day of clinical experience. Emily Thompson, a

second-year medical student from Heppner, precepted with **Russ Nichols, MD**, a family physician at Heppner's Pioneer Memorial Clinic. Emily enjoyed her time in Dr. Nichols' clinic, performing physical exams, taking patient histories and helping with various procedures. In addition to a day of hands-on involvement with a rural physician, students spend the next two days networking over dinner with practitioners and clinic and hospital administrators to find out more about provider networks and the physician lifestyle, and meeting with local high school students to discuss health care careers and take part in activities unique to each town or region.

When the students were asked if there was any proof that participating in these three day rural experiences could open the eyes of fellow students regarding their place in rural medicine, the three students adamantly agreed. Here's what some of the student participants had to say about their experience:

"The Seaside enrichment trip gave me a glimpse of what a career in rural Oregon would look like; a life dedicated to caring for members of a close knit community that I would be a part of. Rural health care provides the opportunity for each physician to personalize their scope of practice. This fosters a group of health care leaders that come from a variety of backgrounds, all with great insights on how to approach complex clinical problems. Overall, the trip has prompted me to further explore the possibility of a career in rural medicine." - Katie Truong, Medical Student, Class of 2019, Oregon Health & Science University

"The opportunity to shadow and see the medical system on the coast was fantastic. I think we are exposed to only a small snippet of medicine at a tertiary care center and this trip helped broaden my understanding of what I can do as a physician. Not only did it show me what life could be like as a rural family medicine doctor but also as a rural surgeon, OBGYN, or ED doc. The trip gave me the opportunity to make connections with

physicians and communities that I may very well work with and serve one day. I think I learned so much on this trip that cannot be simulated in the classroom and I hope more students are able to have this opportunity." - Patrick Bauer, Medical Student, Class of 2019, Oregon Health & Science University

"Growing up in Beaverton, I never had any exposure to "rural life." Through the RMDP trips, I have traveled all around Oregon, including, but not limited to Coos Bay, La Grande, and Seaside/Astoria. One thing that was consistent with each of these experiences was a strong focus on "work-life-balance." With regards to work, the physicians were well integrated into their community and all held close relationships with their patients. Each trip allowed us to work with a doctor, and I recall multiple occasions where the physician knew a patient outside the doctor's office. Though this is not the case with every encounter, I think living around the people you serve helps build on the "patient-physician relationship" that is so crucial to doing the work of a physician. Not only did I see the "work" benefits, but there were also plenty of "life" benefits. I have always enjoyed the outdoors, from cycling to backpacking, and I found that a lot of the rural locations put me that much closer to the places I enjoyed spending my free time. All in all, these trips have helped expose me to the work and life benefits of working in a rural area, as well as the multiple opportunities to get involved in the community and create positive change." - Joey Pryor, Medical Student, Class of 2019, Oregon Health & Science University

Because of the overwhelming need and demand for the Rural Medicine Discovery Program, what began as a simple question in Dr. Gorman's office over a year ago, the vision of Nick, Emily and Abbie will live on for years to come, hopefully producing a more robust future rural workforce in Oregon.