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## **Unique ‘medical Spanish’ course helps physician assistants better examine, communicate with Hispanic patients**

DALLAS – July 5, 2006 – Fluency in “medical Spanish,” acquired through a one-of-a-kind education program at UT Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School, has helped Jill Conway, a physician assistant, uncover medical histories and perform physical exams in Spanish. It is knowledge that has enhanced her relationship with Spanish-speaking patients and improved the medical care they receive.

“Patients feel comfortable in sharing their symptoms, and I can better educate them about their health condition,” said Ms. Conway, a 2004 graduate. “It’s been very helpful.”

The Allied Health Sciences School has the only required, multise­mester, linguist-taught medical Spanish curriculum in a physician assistant studies program in the nation, according to Dr. Eugene Jones, chairman of physician assistant studies.

Such training is increasingly vital, Dr. Jones said, as the Hispanic population is poised to more than triple by 2050, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

“Access to basic health care is often restricted due to language and cultural barriers. And the number of medical personnel who speak Spanish is woefully inadequate, resulting in the use of interpreters, which can hinder the bond between clinicians and patients,” he said.

Cristina González, assistant professor of physician assistant studies, developed the medical Spanish curriculum five years ago. She teaches it to students working on master’s degrees to become physician assistants – health-care professionals who chart medical histories, give physicals, interpret tests and develop treatment plans under physician supervision.

Ms. González has also taught medical Spanish at UT Southwestern Medical School and at UT Dallas, and her curriculum is attracting interest from other area hospitals. In addition, she is writing a medical Spanish textbook for physician assistants or other health-care students.

“Being able to give a physical exam in Spanish can enhance care for Spanish-speaking patients,” Ms. González said. “Some patients often wait to come to a doctor because of fears of being deported, so it’s reassuring to them that people are taking time to treat them in their language.”

For the medical Spanish classes at the allied health school, physician assistant students meet for two hours each week for three semesters. In the first semester, students learn grammar and

(MORE)

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## **‘Medical Spanish’ course – 2**

vocabulary that corresponds to their medical training. The second semester, they conduct mock physical exams with trained, Spanish-speaking simulated patients in a clinical setting. The third semester, students give a presentation on an illness in Spanish and conduct mock physical exams on each other.

Ms. González, who learned English in elementary school after her family came to the United States from Cuba, struggled as a bilingual child to interpret medical information for her parents. Now she shows students how to ask patients to describe symptoms in Spanish.

She also leads the class in singing Spanish love songs so that students can glean cultural tidbits while voicing medical terms such as *doler*, “to hurt,” and *corazón*, “heart.”

A physician assistant who is familiar with the language and culture can help Spanish-speaking patients relax in an unfamiliar setting, said Emily Pratt, a current student.

“It can create a trusting environment,” Ms. Pratt said.

Rebekah Jones, another student, said she and classmates already are applying what they learn in weekly visits to the Mexican Consulate in Dallas, where they conduct health screenings.

“Anybody who will be working in Texas or any of the southern states needs to at least be exposed to Spanish-language training, because there is a huge population of people whose primary language is Spanish,” Ms. Jones said. “By learning it here at this school, I will have a huge advantage, once I graduate, in finding a job and becoming a more effective physician assistant.”

But above all, the program enhances patient care, Ms. González said.

“What good is medical knowledge if you can’t communicate with patients?” she asked.

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