

news THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS HEALTH SCIENCE CENTER AT DALLAS

southwestern medical school ■ graduate school of biomedical sciences ■ school of allied health sciences

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DALLAS--If medicine is not exactly a woman's world, at least in one area they're gaining.

In the Physician's Assistant program of The University of Texas' School of Allied Health Sciences, which enrolled its second class earlier this fall, females now outnumber traditionally dominant males, 14 to 13.

While that may not add up to overwhelming superiority, it nonetheless marks a reversal. This year's incoming class counts 10 females and six males in the school, which began last year the training of specialized aides to assist physicians in performance of many routine tasks in medical care.

The second-year class of student PAs, now in clinical training and due to become the program's first graduates next August, numbers seven men and four women.

These figures make the Dallas program one of only two in the nation with approximately half female enrollment, says its director, John Delahunt. And, he says, the emphasis on female participation is not by design.

"There are no quotas, and there's been no conscious effort to favor any one group or individual over another," he said. The admissions committee -- three physicians and two members of the school staff--select applicants solely on the basis of scholastic background, merit and potential adaptability to the work, he explained.

There were 112 applicants for the 16 available places in this year's beginning class, and 40 per cent of those applying were women.

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The student who finished academically at the head of the first-year class is a young woman, an ex-schoolteacher with no previous medical experience or training, Delahunt noted.

The pioneering program to train a new breed of medical professional specialists is one of eight educational offerings of the School of Allied Health Sciences, a component of the UT Health Science Center at Dallas. Classrooms and offices of the school are at 6003 Maple, a few blocks from the main UTHSCD campus.

Students in the PA program spend two semesters of 20 credit hours each in classroom work in basic sciences, followed by 15 months of clinical training in hospitals, clinics and physicians' offices. Clinical subjects studied include medicine, pediatrics, surgery and family practice, plus such electives as cardiology and obstetrics.

Hospitals participating in training include Veterans Administration, Children's Medical Center, Parkland and Methodist.

After two years of intensive study, graduates will earn B.S. degrees in health care sciences--and thus qualify as this area's first qualified physicians' assistants. Before entering the program, students have completed two years of college work.

Delahunt sees the graduates as filling a special niche in the medical manpower-spectrum--one never filled in such a way before.

"These professional assistants will be capable of extending the effectiveness of physicians, most of whom spend an inordinate amount of their time performing routine office procedures," he said.

Such tasks as taking medical histories, administering medications, casts and bandages, giving physical exams and explaining diagnostic procedures to patients can be handled by the new assistants.

This in turn will free the doctor to spend more time with seriously ill patients, Delahunt said. The PAs will always be under direct supervision of the physician.

Surveys indicate a readiness among area physicians to employ the new assistants. Rural and inner-city areas where little primary medical care often is available stand to benefit most from utilization of physicians assistants, Delahunt added.

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