

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

Contact: Emily Martinez
(214) 648-3404

PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS ENJOYING VITAL ROLES

DALLAS - October 3, 1994 - Both say it's everything they could ask for in a job. Jo Wright gets to enjoy small-town living again. Annette Hawkins is able to raise her son in a multi-cultural urban environment. And, maybe best of all, as physician assistants they're reaching out daily to a lot of people who might otherwise go without medical care.

As Congress wrestles with health-care reform, trying to figure out how to expand coverage while saving money, these two recent graduates of The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas' Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School are showing how primary care can be efficiently extended to underserved rural communities and financially strapped inner-city residents.

REACHING OUT TO RURAL COMMUNITIES

Brady is a West Texas town of about 5,800, small enough that residents refer to San Angelo, which is 60 miles west of Brady and has 85,000 people, as the nearest "city." The Brady Regional Health Center is staffed by Jo Wright and two family-practice physicians.

"I guess I got the idea to become a physician assistant when I started hearing these news stories about rural women who, when they were about to deliver their babies, were having to make harrowing 80-mile journeys to the nearest medical care," Wright said.

Since then, Wright has heard firsthand accounts of patients from small towns around Brady who suffered through several days of bad stomachaches before

(MORE)

PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS — 2

summoning the will to travel the hour and a half to the nearest medical facility. Several times doctors discovered they had acute appendicitis and had to order emergency operations.

When patients have better access to medical care, Wright points out, they're less likely to face life-threatening emergencies. She sees many of her patients regularly, treating them for a range of ailments including viruses, ear infections and chronic illnesses like diabetes. She also performs minor surgery, such as repairing lacerations. When she arrived, Wright was dealing with 10 patients a day. She now averages 20.

Since her arrival at the clinic last year, the medical staff has been able to spend more time with each patient and devote more energy to patient education. Already, she's determined that one young woman who had experienced abdominal discomfort for three years - which had never been properly diagnosed during her brief annual exams - had a serious abdominal infection.

Wright once was interested in attending medical school, but she saw physician assistant training as a faster and less expensive alternative. A growing number of underserved communities view physician assistants the same way. They can offer many of the same services as doctors but at a lower cost. "We work under the supervision of physicians," Wright said. "The patients actually are getting two for the price of one."

Personal involvement was important to Wright, who left her job as a medical technologist because she wished to work with patients instead of test tubes. "I went into medicine because I wanted to develop relationships with people and see that I was making a difference in their lives," she said. "This situation is

(MORE)

PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS — 3

great because I get to work with entire families."

Having spent her early 20s in San Angelo, Wright also was happy that she and her husband were able to return to the area. She was welcomed into the community with open arms and has grown accustomed to being stopped in the grocery store by a neighbor/patient with a medically related concern. But there are some drawbacks. "I always expect to run into someone I've seen at the clinic, so I've had to start being just a little more conscious of the way I look before I run into the store," Wright said with a laugh.

EXTENDING HEALTH CARE TO THOSE MOST IN NEED

Working in the Parkland Memorial Hospital-affiliated Bluit-Flowers Health Center in Oak Cliff, Hawkins faces different challenges. Like Wright, however, she realizes she is "helping people who really need it."

Hawkins, a licensed X-ray technician and sonographer in addition to being a physician assistant, is widowed and the mother of a 6-year-old son. She fielded several employment offers before taking the inner-city clinic position. "I wanted to work with and help my people, and I wanted my son to grow up in the city and get a well-rounded view of things."

She often deals with people who have difficulty with the medical system. A frequent challenge is the patient who fails to follow medical advice. She tries to get to know these patients, earn their trust and understand their situation.

"We must treat the whole person. I'll have a grandmother come in here who has high blood pressure. She's trying to raise her grandkids and perhaps deal with a daughter or son with a drug problem," she said. "If we're really going to help that woman, we have to understand her lifestyle challenges and try to help

(MORE)

PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS — 4

her deal with the social and medical issues."

Hawkins enjoys these tests. She said she uses her health-care training "to the full extent." But there are some situations that she wasn't prepared for when she started in the profession last year. "I was overwhelmed by the severity and complexity of the diseases we deal with," she said. "No training can really get you ready for that first time that you have to tell a patient that he or she has cancer."

Hawkins, however, can appreciate her opportunities to help people. Unfortunately, she sees much more need for the services of physician assistants than people available to provide them.

"I think we must have many more training programs for physician assistants," Hawkins said, adding that patient acceptance comes quickly for physician assistants.

UT SOUTHWESTERN MOVING TO MEET DEMAND

UT Southwestern is attempting to meet this demand, but physician assistant programs often have to rely almost entirely on government funding because they don't have the donor-luring appeal of research projects. UT Southwestern recently had 1,200 applicants for the 35 slots available in the next class. The following year, the class will be expanded to 45 students.

Jeff G. Nicholson, the new director of clinical education for the allied health school's physician assistant program, came to UT Southwestern from a clinic in rural South Dakota. His supervising doctor practiced 30 miles away, so Nicholson said he had to handle many emergencies himself, including heart attacks and serious farm injuries. While working at the clinic, he received three to four

(MORE)

PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS — 5

calls a week from recruiters eager to find a physician assistant to fill a slot in their small town.

Nicholson has a master's degree in education from Harvard University and had been accepted into medical school when he decided to go the physician-assistant route. He had spent time in Belize and Mexico and had seen the need abroad and at home for primary care.

"Physician assistants go through a much different socialization process than doctors. A lot of us enter the profession for the same reason. We put a strong emphasis on extending services to the underserved," Nicholson said.

Currently, 10 job opportunities exist for each physician assistant graduate. "We're enjoying the current boon in interest in the physician assistant profession," Nicholson said. "We're looking forward to expanding the availability of quality physician assistants in order to meet growing demand and reach out more to the medically underserved."

###

(*PHOTOS AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST.)