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# News

The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas  
5323 Harry Hines Boulevard Dallas, Texas 75235 (214) 688-3404

CONTACT: Ann Williams  
Office: 214/688-3404  
Home: 214/375-6043  
or: Ann Harrell  
Home: 214/369-2695

\*\*\*\*\*Physician assistant student serves preceptorship in Linden.

NOTE TO EDITOR: Branson will be in Linden until June 14.

DALLAS--"You could say my physician assistant is my right arm," one small town doctor said recently.

Trained to perform physicals, take medical histories, make hospital rounds, assist in surgery and initiate emergency treatment, PAs free doctors from routine duties so they may spend more time with patients needing more specialized skills.

Senior PA students from The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas are currently involved in the final step in their training, when they work closely with a doctor in a small town or rural practice.

Dr. Walter Viard of Linden is serving as preceptor, or teacher, for Rick Branson from the Dallas school.

Physician assistant training consists of two years of traditional college study followed by two years in an AMA-accredited PA program. The junior year is spent in the classroom, and the senior year is spent actually working with patients in the hospital, in clinic, in the emergency room and in the doctor's office.

"The students are selected by physicians, trained by physicians and employed and supervised by physicians," says Dr. William Neal, the physician who directs the PA program at the Dallas health science center. "Although the goals are different, the methods of educating PA students and medical students are virtually identical. The medical education environment is tried and true for students of any ilk. They must have a crack at taking care of patients themselves--under supervision."

During clinical training, for example, the student is sent in to interview and examine a patient with no clue about what to expect. The student must make a tentative diagnosis and suggest a plan of therapy and patient education. The supervising physician then follows up with an evaluation of the patient to check the student's skills. During this training with patients, PA students and medical students work side by side on rotations in internal medicine, obstetrics, pediatrics and surgery.

Clinical training takes place in Parkland Memorial Hospital and the Veterans Administration Hospital in Dallas prior to the preceptorships with doctors in private practice. PAs then receive bachelor's degrees from the School of Allied Health Sciences at UIHSCD.

After passing a national exam, they are certified to work under a doctor's supervision. During the last regular session the Texas Legislature amended the Medical Practice Act to define the use of PAs.

So far, few of the 84 graduates of the program have chosen to work in underserved areas. But last year the staff began a new emphasis on meeting the needs of rural and underserved areas. Students are recruited from those areas, the need is discussed throughout their training and they are now being sent to those areas for required preceptorships. Hopefully, they will decide to settle in that area or in one similar to it.

This may help to explain why an already overworked physician would take on a student. Once PAs are trained, they can bring some relief to doctors practicing in areas where there are not enough physicians to handle the patient load.