

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

Media Contact: Amy Shields
214-648-3404
amy.shields@utsouthwestern.edu

ADDING NUTRITION COURSES TO MEDICAL SCHOOL CURRICULUM INCREASES FUTURE PHYSICIANS' KNOWLEDGE, SELF-CONFIDENCE

DALLAS – Nov. 19, 2002 – Integrating nutrition education into the medical school curriculum has been a recipe for success for future doctors from UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, a new study shows.

In 1999 UT Southwestern responded to a need to train future physicians in nutrition education – a line of study not found at most U.S. medical schools – by including cardiovascular nutrition education in the curriculum of fourth-year medical students. The new study evaluating this training, published in the November issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, shows that the students improved their knowledge and self-confidence about nutrition, which should ultimately lead the future doctors to address nutrition issues with their patients.

“With the growing number of patients with obesity, diabetes and other nutrition-related disease, the need for primary-care physicians to address nutrition is becoming more critical,” said Dr. Jo Ann Carson, associate professor of clinical nutrition at UT Southwestern and lead author of the study. “Findings from this study indicate that fourth-year medical students want and value nutrition information so that they can apply it during clerkships.”

Data collected in 1998 and 1999 from surveys conducted by the Association of American Medical Colleges indicated that upon graduation almost two-thirds of medical school students perceived that inadequate time had been devoted to nutrition during their education.

In this study, Carson and her collaborators obtained information regarding knowledge, attitude and self-efficacy of nutrition education from 40 medical students during a three-month period preceding integration of nutrition coursework. The researchers then compared this information with data obtained from 156 students from 1999 to 2000 after nutrition education was integrated.

During the four-week cardiovascular nutrition-based education curriculum, the students received resource materials related to cardiovascular nutrition, completed two World Wide Web-based cases and participated in a one-hour class discussion.

(MORE)

NUTRITION COURSES - 2

Results from the study indicated that students who participated in the cardiovascular nutrition-based curriculum were more likely to address nutrition with patients.

“If physicians will address nutrition and weight with patients, then maybe we can minimize the number of people who are overweight, reducing their risk for disease,” said Carson, who is a registered dietitian. “It’s not that these students don’t study the structure of a fatty acid in biochemistry, but they may not know to advise the patient to eat half of a meat portion served in restaurants.”

Carson is course director of the first nutrition elective offered at UT Southwestern. The course, Applied Nutrition, is targeted to first- and second-year medical students. The six-week course presents basic nutrition concepts through the use of cases, a simulated supermarket tour and presentations by physicians from the Center for Human Nutrition at UT Southwestern.

In the third year, students in the family medicine clerkship participate in a lecture on obesity, and students in the obstetrics/gynecology clerkship complete a computer-based case focusing on prenatal nutrition. Fourth-year students participate in a course based on the cardiovascular nutrition curriculum from this current study.

UT Southwestern was one of the first 10 medical schools to receive the Nutrition Academic Award, a five-year, \$750,000 grant from the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute that funded the study. The grant’s purpose is to increase opportunities for students, staff, faculty and practicing physicians to learn nutrition principles and clinical skills, with an emphasis on preventing cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes and other chronic diseases.

Other UT Southwestern researchers involved in the study were Dr. Lynne Kirk, associate dean for graduate medical education, and Dr. Shalini Reddy, now with the University of Chicago. Researchers from the Agency for Health Care Research and Quality of the Department of Health and Human Services and from UT Austin also contributed.

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