

# SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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## UT SOUTHWESTERN PHYSICIAN ASSISTANT PROGRAM SETS UP TRAINING AGREEMENT WITH WEST TEXAS HOSPITAL SYSTEM

DALLAS — January 20, 1995 — As rural communities search for new ways to attract medical professionals, UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas has entered into an agreement with San Angelo-based Shannon Medical Center that is designed to encourage physician assistants to consider small-town medical practices.

Shannon contracted with UT Southwestern for two years to cover the expense of placing physician assistant students in Shannon facilities throughout West Texas. As the first stage of the program, UT Southwestern sent six of its students to Shannon health-care clinics in 1994. Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School, a component of UT Southwestern, requires its aspiring physician assistants to spend eight weeks in a rural setting before graduation.

"We are very appreciative of Shannon's support," said Dr. Eugene Jones, director of the physician assistant program at UT Southwestern. "It's the beginning of our enhanced community outreach. It will give us an opportunity to get more of our students in rural areas and for them to become prepared for that kind of practice."

Physician assistants are trained to diagnose and treat common medical problems under the supervision of a physician. The physician does not have to be on site while the physician assistant is seeing patients. Therefore, areas that may not be able to support a full-time doctor can get medical assistance through an attending physician assistant. UT Southwestern is due to graduate 27 physician assistants in August. It had 785 applicants for the 35 openings this year. However, most of those applicants do not come from rural communities or inner cities, which are the populations most in need of additional medical professionals.

Research has shown that physician assistants who have grown up in a rural area are much more likely to go back to small-town living than are physician assistants who are accustomed to a faster-paced environment, Jones said. Shannon and UT Southwestern officials hope to use their new agreement to recruit more

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students from West Texas who will want to return there after graduation.

"It's been difficult for us to recruit physician assistants, and we feel that if we can get students out here, let them get to know us, then we'll have a better chance of getting them to work for us after school," said Lawrence Leonard, senior vice president for Shannon Medical Center.

Leonard said his group wants to find quality physician assistants who will settle into the community, offering patients a long-term relationship. "At first, we had concerns about how physician assistants would be accepted by patients, but visits have actually gone up in clinics that formerly had doctors. We think this is because we're attracting high-quality professionals."

Jones said UT Southwestern also is considering making similar arrangements with health-care facilities in South Central Texas and the Panhandle. The funding coming from Shannon is needed to cover the expense of sending instructors to West Texas for on-site evaluation of students and recruiting programs, Jones said.

Shannon is a major health-care provider for West Texas. It has rural clinics in Brady, Menard, Coleman, Sterling City, Robert Lee, Ballinger and Big Spring. Leonard said the UT Southwestern agreement is the first such contract that the system has entered. Shannon employs 10 physician assistants currently but expects to double that number in the future.

Tosha Elliott, who graduated from UT Southwestern in 1994 after a training stint in Shannon's Robert Lee clinic, said she would "love to move to a small town and have my own practice." She is now practicing at a Lewisville clinic while her husband finishes his residency at Parkland Memorial Hospital in Dallas. She said they intend to move to a small town in the not-too-distant future.

Working in West Texas confirmed her positive attitude toward rural life. "When I was in Robert Lee, I really got to know my patients on a personal level," she said. "Things weren't quite so rushed, and I liked that."

Jo Wright, another UT Southwestern graduate who grew up in West Texas, returned to the Shannon clinic in Brady after training with the system as a student. She said she enjoys the atmosphere and the job because she is able to treat entire families and a wide range of medical problems.

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