

# SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

Contact: Ione Echeverria  
214-648-3404

ione.echeverria@utsouthwestern.edu

## **INCREASING HEALTH-CARE NEEDS OF TEXAS MAY NOT BE MET BY CURRENT HEALTH-CARE WORK FORCE**

DALLAS – Feb. 28, 2001 – As a physician assistant for a private clinic, Kathy Enright said she was often frustrated by a system that valued patient quotas over a patient's quality of care. So she decided to relocate to a small rural community where she could devote more time to her patients.

But Enright and others like her are finding it difficult to work in rural health clinics because a lack of profitability is forcing many clinics to close. There are also less physician assistants to meet the increasing health-care demands of Texas.

In a study published in *Texas Medicine*, researchers at UT Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School found that the current physician-assistant work force will not adequately meet the increasing health-care needs of Texas during the next five years, and they identified several factors that will contribute to the shortage.

Physician assistants, or PAs, have been an integral part of the health-care system since 1967. Physician assistants practice in clinical association with physicians, who serve as their supervisors and employers.

Dr. Gene Jones, chairman of physician assistant studies at the allied health school and co-author of the paper, said decreasing enrollment rates for physician assistant programs is limiting the number of practicing PAs. Sixty percent of the health-care work force is made up of PAs and other allied health professionals.

"A number of the mature PA programs are holding the line on admissions and, in some cases, slightly reducing their admissions based on available resources," said Jones, who is chairman of the Association of Physician Assistant Programs Research Institute and past president of the group. "To accommodate the shortfalls of the state, the enrollment rate for physician assistant programs should be increasing instead of holding steady."

Dr. Roderick Hooker, chief of the Division of Health Services Research at the allied health school, said these findings are not limited to PAs, but mirror all other health professions including physicians and nurses.

The increasing population in Texas and closure rates for rural health clinics are among the reasons that access to health care is decreasing in parts of the state. Further compounding the problem, Texas has the highest rate of uninsured residents in the country.

(MORE)

## HEALTH-CARE NEEDS – 2

Although access barriers to health care in Texas remain a substantial public-health issue, PAs have helped reduce these barriers, especially in rural communities, said Hooker, who co-wrote and gathered data for the study.

Enright, who practices in Robert Lee, a West Texas community of 1,200, said a majority of her patients are older adults with multiple health problems and have difficulty traveling to the nearest doctor's office.

"Without our clinic, people would have to drive 30 miles to be seen by a physician," Enright said.

Texas has extraordinarily high rural needs. More than 20 percent of Texans live in nonurban areas, which account for 82 percent of Texas land.

"These are very important social issues, especially for legislators who have to determine where scarce dollars should be allocated," said Hooker, who has written more than 50 scholarly papers on the health work force and is the co-author of the widely used book *Physician Assistants in American Medicine*.

Jones said conducting the study opened his eyes to the health-care needs of Texas and how to tailor the physician assistant studies program at UT Southwestern to meet those needs.

He said UT Southwestern's physician assistant studies program will convert to a master's level curriculum this spring. UT Southwestern is the third school in Texas – and the first school within the UT System – to be authorized to award a master's degree in PA studies from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

"Enrollment into our PA program is highly competitive. Every year, our office must review 200 applications to fill 36 openings," Jones said. "Our enrollment is limited by the number of qualified training sites. We can't dilute a student's clinical education and have them less prepared."

Jones said one of the primary focal points of the program is to expose students to populations that do not have adequate health-care services available and encourage students to seek employment in those settings when they graduate. All PA students are required to complete at least one clinical rotation in a rural setting.

This news release is available on our World Wide Web home page at  
[http://www.utsouthwestern.edu/home\\_pages/news/](http://www.utsouthwestern.edu/home_pages/news/)

To automatically receive news releases from UT Southwestern via e-mail, send a message to  
UTSWNEWS-REQUEST@listserv.swmed.edu. Leave the subject line blank and in the text box, type  
SUB UTSWNEWS