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Yakima medical school completes first building

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YAKIMA — A new Pacific Northwest medical school opened on Wednesday with a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the College of Osteopathic Medicine, which plans to send primary care doctors to serve in rural and low-income areas in a five-state region.

The private, nonprofit Pacific Northwest University of Health Sciences aims to open several colleges over the next decade on its 42-acre campus in central Washington. The first school, the College of Osteopathic Medicine, welcomes its inaugural class of 75 students on Aug. 4.

The general contractor for the project was KDA Construction of Salem, Ore., and the architect was Loofburrow Architects. Hargis did mechanical and electrical work.

Osteopathic physicians, who have D.O. after their names, receive training and medical board certification similar to allopathic physicians, or M.D.s. They also are trained in manipulation techniques, which include moving muscles and joints to diagnose, treat and prevent illness and injury.

Seventy percent of the students are from the Pacific Northwest. Already, the college has agreements with hospitals, clinics and doctors in Alaska, Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Montana to provide clinical training to students in their third and fourth years.

“PNWU stands to significantly impact Eastern Washington and the Pacific Northwest as a whole,” said Dr. Stanley Flemming, university president. “We’re developing our entire programs in rural communities with the intent that if doctors train in those communities, they will stay in those communities.”

More than 35 million people nationally live in areas that have been designated as medically underserved — lacking in primary care doctors, dentists and mental health professionals — by the federal government. In the Northwest region that includes the five states served by the new school, nearly 1.5 million people live in medically underserved areas.

All of Alaska, Idaho and Oregon have been designated such a region. All but one of Washington’s 39 counties and all but six of Montana’s 56 counties received the same designation, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Some 333 doctors would need to be hired in rural and low-income areas to lift those designations.

The department’s National Health Service Corps, developed in the 1970s, offers scholarships and loan repayment programs for some doctors who agree to practice in an underserved area. The Corps spends every dollar it receives from Congress for the program; its 2008 budget is \$123 million.

But there remain shortages in rural or low-income areas, because many doctors choose not to practice there or decide to specialize or pursue research opportunities, said David Bowman, spokesman for the department's Health Resources and Services Administration.

“There is a definite need for primary care practitioners in many parts of the country, and if the school can provide those individuals and they'd be willing to serve in some of these underserved areas, it would be fantastic,” he said.

The Yakima college becomes the 25th osteopathic medical school in the country. Nearly 14,500 students attended osteopathic medical schools in the 2006-07 school year, an increase of 7.5 percent over the previous school year, according to the American Osteopathic Association.

About 54,700 osteopathic physicians are currently practicing around the U.S.

Osteopathic medicine is the fastest growing segment in health care, and the new Pacific Northwest school fills a void in a part of the country where medical care is sorely needed, said Dr. George Thomas, former president of the American Osteopathic Association.

The University of Washington School of Medicine, founded in 1946, doesn't consider the new school competition. The UW contracts with Washington, Alaska, Idaho, Montana and Wyoming to provide medical education — an area with a population equivalent to Ohio, said Dr. John Coombs, vice dean for regional affairs, rural health and graduate medical education.

The difference? Ohio has seven accredited allopathic medical schools.

“There are roughly 500 to 550 new medical students who begin every year within the state of Ohio. And in Washington, next year, we'll have 216,” Coombs said. “If you compare us with other states, there is a continued shortage of medical school seats within the state.”

In just its first year, the new Pacific Northwest college received 1,976 applications, and selected 75 students for its inaugural class. Many of those students and its 33 faculty members were on hand to offer tours of the new \$19.7 million facility for the hundreds of people who turned out to celebrate.

Jessica Morales, a member of the inaugural class from Ludington, Mich., said she was drawn to the small-town feel of Yakima and the potential for providing health care in underserved communities.

“I've never had a moment of doubt,” said Morales, 24. “It's a great opportunity to be the very first class. We can make history.”

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