

Future doctors courted for area

Program aims to get physicians to rural regions

BY RUTH EPSTEIN
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CANAAN — The rural nature of the Northwest Corner and its neighboring towns along the New York border have much to offer, say its proponents. In an attempt to showcase the quality-of-life features and perhaps entice some young doctors to consider settling here, a group of activists came up with a plan. Why not introduce medical students to the area and show them firsthand the benefits of living and working in a rural region?

So, last year a planning committee started working on turning the idea into a reality. On Friday, the final day of the two-week program, an evaluation session was held during lunch at Geer Village. Five students took part in rotating through different facilities and visiting several places of interest during their stay. The planners came to hear what they had to say.

Gertrude O'Sullivan, director of communications and special programs at the Foundation for Community Health in Sharon, had heard of such programs and she approached others to see if they might come up with something similar. Representatives from Geer, Sharon Hospital, Hudson River Health Care and Northwestern Connecticut Community College's Center for Workforce Development, along with the Northwest Connecticut and Catskill Hudson Area Healthcare centers, were excited to jump on board to implement the rural Health Immersion Program.

They began contacting medical schools and students from Touro College in Midletown, N.Y., and Quinnipi-



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Four medical students spent the last two weeks in the Northwest Corner learning about rural healthcare. They are, from left, are Yamini Chalikondra, Rushi Patel, Chris Morgan and Archani Patel.

ac University attended the first session beginning July 18. "The concept was to introduce our community; both the medical side and the lifestyle," said O'Sullivan.

Kevin O'Connell, executive director of Geer, said the students were exposed to a broad range of healthcare, including the hospital, senior living facilities, emergency services (by the North Canaan EMS), local physicians and community health clinics. "We wanted them to understand the challenges in seeking healthcare in rural communities."

ONE EVENING WAS SPENT having dinner and conversations with current and retired doctors from the area: Eugene Chin, Suzanne Lefebvre, Malcolm Brown, Bill Gallup and John Charde.

The students at the lunch were Yamini Chalikonda, a second-year student at Touro from South Windsor; Chris Morgan, a fourth-year student at Quinnipiac from Wallingford; Rushi Patel, a

second-year student at Touro from Lancaster, Penn., and Archani Patel, a second-year student at Touro from Toronto. Lauren Roach, a student at Touro from Minneapolis, was not able to attend.

The students all spoke enthusiastically of their experiences during the lunch. Chalikonda said she found meeting with several different healthcare providers and speaking with the doctors at the dinner very helpful. "They talked about what we can do as students to better interact with other doctors." She said they were not at all condescending. She did think rural healthcare can be somewhat frightening because of the limited number of doctors.

"But the theme I heard of rural healthcare is that a doctor feels needed," she said. "I like that part."

MORGAN SAID HE'D NEVER been to the Northwest Corner before and was pleased to see what the area has to offer and the opportunities for doctors.

"It's got my interest. But I realize specialists are far away and there are decisions to be made with limited resources."

"This was a real eye opener to me about rural medicine," said Rushi Patel. "Limitations aren't necessarily true. There's more access to medical care, but not enough providers. At first I didn't think this was a viable option for me, but now I can consider it."

Archani Patel said coming from Toronto, she liked the small-town feel of the area. She found the doctors to be very encouraging and was pleased they took the time to show them some clinical procedures. "This experience put Sharon Hospital of the map for me."

All the students commented on how impressed they were when accompanying a doctor on rounds as he visited migrant workers and the compassion he exhibited.

O'Sullivan explained that they were amazed the program was conducted with virtually no budget. All the donations were made in kind, such as the housing provided by Indian Mountain School and meals at various facilities.

The planning committee was very pleased with the results of the program and seriously took under advisement some of the suggestions made by the students for future sessions, which they are enthusiastically starting to develop.

Others on the committee besides O'Sullivan and O'Connell are Heather Cappabianca from NWCCC, Tricia Harrity of Northwestern Connecticut AHEC, Rob Wingate of Catskill Hudson AHEC, Chris Miller and Peter Cordeau of Sharon Hospital and Sherry Wyckoff of Hudson River Health Care. Representing the medical schools were David Yens of Touro and Andy Selling of Quinnipiac.

Contact Ruth Epstein at kcsruth@aol.com.