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Seed money

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Times Staff Writer
Originally published 2008-11-27

Gunnison Valley Hospital (GVH) is putting its money where its mouth is to help ensure a continuous flow of physicians to serve local communities.

At a celebratory gathering Saturday night, the hospital and the Gunnison Valley Health Foundation awarded a $10,000 scholarship to Gunnison Valley native Laura Holder to help cover her medical school expenses.

"It's relatively uncommon for a specific community to develop their own scholarship like this," said Dr. Mark Deutchman. He's the director of the rural track in family medicine at University of Colorado Denver (CU), where Holder is studying.

The scholarship is the first in what will likely become an annual contribution, depending on the long-term projected needs of the valley, said hospital spokesman Dan Marshall.

GVH plans to assist each chosen medical student for three years, or $30,000 per student.

There is one string attached, however. The students must agree to come to the Gunnison Valley to practice medicine when they finish school -- for at least one year of service locally for every year they received the award, Marshall explained.

"To have the vision to do this is a very good thing," Deutchman said. "A lot of communities wait until they have an emergency, until they lose a physician ... and then they frantically scramble for somebody."

He credited long-time Gunnison physician John Tarr for spearheading the scholarship program.

Three years ago, Tarr did an age analysis of primary care doctors in Gunnison County.

At that time, the average age of the physicians was 57, Tarr said, not much younger than when most people begin to think about retirement. Tarr realized that if there is no long term planning to find replacements, the Gunnison Valley would be "hurting for primary care physicians in 10 to 15 years," he said.

Under that realization, he brought the vision for the scholarship program to the hospital board.

A hefty tab

Holder said the scholarship should cover about a quarter of her annual expenses at school, when a moderate living expense is included.

Tuition alone at CU-Denver medical school is $25,000.

When fees and living expenses are included, many of the school's medical students graduate $200,000 in debt, Deutchman said. "So every bit of help that we can give students is valuable."

GVH’s $10,000 award this year came from the Gunnison Valley Health Foundation, which raised money for the scholarship through its golf tournament and The Taste of Caring -- a fundraising dinner at Marchitelli's Gourmet Noodle in Crested Butte.

Deutchman said there tends to be a "significant shortage" of physicians in rural areas -- partly because medical students are attracted to higher paying specialties, rather than primary care in rural settings.

The American College of Physicians recently did a survey and found that less than 2 percent of current medical students are considering a career in internal medicine or primary care, Tarr said. The rest are looking elsewhere, since the average procedural specialist makes two to three times as much money as a primary care doctor, he said.

Community Calendar

Monday, 15
Pilates Apparatus Sessions
Yoga Basics with Leia Morrison
Vinyasa Flow Yoga with Leia
Monday Night Shakedown Yoga with Tiffany
Explore the possibility of loving unconditionally

Tuesday, 16
Board of County Commissioners

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While the GVH scholarship program will likely open up to other schools in Colorado as it develops, Marshall figures it will continue to fall back on CU-Denver, because its "rural track" program is such a good match for Gunnison.

Tarr, who helped develop the school's rural track, said it is designed to prepare students to practice in isolated areas, where they need to be very self-sufficient and broadly trained.

To accomplish this, the students are "turned loose" early during medical school to have ample opportunity to do patient contacts and procedures, he said. Students are also encouraged to develop a relationship with a rural community.

As part of that, Holder spent last summer working with Dr. Marie Matthews at Gunnison Valley Family Physicians (GVFP).

This work solidified her decision to come back to the Gunnison Valley.

Holder, whose father John Holder works as a physician's assistant at GVFP, said she knew she'd be happy moving back to the Gunnison Valley. However, witnessing the close and trusting relationships between doctors and patients at GVFP sealed the deal for her.

"In a small town you might be the one who delivers a child and then you see them for their well-child check and then you do their physical for them to go off to college," she said.

Marshall said the hospital couldn't have asked for a better candidate.

"She's smart, she's a fluent Spanish speaker, she knows the area and the people around here," he said.

According to Tarr, one of the most "powerful predictors," of whether a student will practice rural medicine is if he or she came from a rural area.

Perhaps this is partially because they may have an appreciation for tightly-knit communities. That is the case for Holder.

"When you're in a small town you know people in other contexts, you know their kids, you know their grandparents. They're probably your banker or your school teacher, so you have a rapport with them already," she said of potential patients.

That's important, she said, because so much of practicing medicine depends on communication and trust.

That web of relationships has come full circle with the scholarship program. Tarr not only helped to bring Holder back to the valley through the program, but also delivered her into the valley as a baby.

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