Preceptorship Leads to Potential Career Prospect

Homecoming included mountain views, low cost of living

By Buffy Gilfoil

The following is the third in a series of articles about the Rural Track at the University of Colorado Denver School of Medicine. For more information, see previous articles in the CAFP Magazine or at http://www.uchsc.edu/som/rural. Family physicians interested in hosting a Rural Track student can contact program director Mark Deutchman, MD, at mark.deutchman@ucdenver.edu or 303-724-9725.

While many of his peers in medical school took the summer of 2008 off from their studies, D.J. Dutton was learning and gaining clinical experience in Walsenburg, Colo.

A student in the Rural Track at the University of Colorado Denver Medical School, Dutton spent several weeks during the summer between the first and second year of medical school being precepted by Michael Moll, MD, and Lori Moll, MD, in Walsenburg. The experience was part of the Rural Track curriculum.

Dutton grew up in La Junta, Colo., which is on the eastern plains about 60 miles from Pueblo. He earned a bachelor’s degree in Molecular Cellular Developmental Biology at the University of Colorado, Boulder. He then went to Parkview School of Medical Technology in Pueblo, Colo., so he could get certification as a clinical technologist.

He worked for a time at Parkview, but he had little direct contact with patients in the large hospital. He moved on to Spanish Peaks Regional Hospital in Walsenburg, where he found lots to like about both the community and the hospital.

Walsenburg, according to Dutton, is a small community near the mountains. In fact, the mountains are in view from many of the hospital windows. The hospital is just across the road, Highway 160, from Lathrop State Park, which has two lakes. The cost of living is low, which could help a young doctor pay off student loans. Dutton liked the community so much he bought a house during his three years working as a lab technician in Walsenburg.

Dutton also liked the work environment. “Work is way more rewarding in a small community because you can interact directly with patients,” he said. “I was working side-by-side with doctors.”

He often talked to the doctors, including Chris Wilson, DO, and found himself thinking that it might be worth the time and expense to become a doctor and the work would be “awesome.”

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Dutton took the necessary pre-requisites, applied and got into medical school.

So, when he arrived in Walsenburg for his preceptorship, it was literally a homecoming. He already knew many of the people with whom he worked and he knew his way around the hospital and its inner workings. “Having already known the people down there, it was nice to work with them,” he said.

His official preceptors were Drs. Moll, but he also learned from other doctors at Spanish Peaks Family Medicine, including Dr. Wilson. In addition to working at the clinic, Dutton also joined doctors on rounds in the hospital and served patients in the Colorado State Veterans Nursing Home, which is adjacent to the hospital even though it is a separate entity.

“If a patient on the nursing home side needed hospital services, you would just have to take them across the threshold of the hospital,” he said. “Admitting a patient there was just as easy as wheeling them over and putting them in a hospital bed.”

He said both Drs. Moll are patient people who love to teach by guiding students through learning by doing. He was allowed to dictate notes that one of the doctors would review with him and include in the patient’s chart. Dutton also took histories and performed physical exams and procedures. “Whatever the doctor is comfortable with is what you do,” he said. “You learn so much by participating in the care of the patient.”

He feels the immersion in clinical activities gives him and his Rural Track colleagues an advantage. “You don’t get that experience in your first year normally,” he said. “When we go into the clinical rotation in the third year, we’ll have a lot more strength.”

In addition to their preceptorship between the first and second years, students in the Rural Track also see preceptors on a weekly basis during their first and second years. Dutton’s preceptor is Grant Taylor, DO, of Fort Collins. Dr. Taylor had lived for a while in Walsenburg and moved away mainly for his family’s sake.

“He really liked it, but it didn’t work for his family,” Dutton said.

While Dutton reported no complaints about his preceptorship, one problem he observed was a plague of politics at the hospital. He saw the difficulties involved in attracting long-term managers for the hospital and doctors for the community. He feels the situation would improve if doctors had a stronger voice on the hospital’s board of directors. He also feels hospitals and colleges should work in closer collaboration.

As he continues to work toward his medical degree, Dutton maintains his ties with Walsenburg, filling in occasionally as a lab technician. In addition, he plans to return there for 12 weeks during his third year of medical school as part of a new effort to combine training in rural, ambulatory and hospital care. Practicing in Walsenburg after he graduates is a possibility, he said, adding, “Maybe I could have a ranch.”