Med Student’s Eyes Were Opened to Possibilities, Pitfalls
For Kelsey Hurley, Health Care is a Family Affair

BY BUFFY GIFOIL

The following is the fourth 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.ucdenver.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.

Spending four weeks during the summer of 2008 with two doctors in southern Colorado made medical student Kelsey Hurley more certain she wants to be a Family Physician, even though she said she can also see the potential difficulty of balancing her professional and personal lives. Hurley is enrolled in the Rural Track program at the University of Colorado Denver School of Medicine, where the summer preceptorship is part of the curriculum.

“I loved the experience. It was probably just what I needed between the first and second years,” Hurley said. She pointed out that the first two years of medical school are primarily based in the classroom. “It was nice to remember why I was there in the first place… It was refreshing to get to see patients.”

For three days a week, Hurley’s preceptor was Jennifer Harbert, MD, the only doctor in Creede. Hurley described the location as a beautiful mountain town at the headwaters of the Rio Grande River. She said the population is less than 500 in the winter and much larger in the summer. While in Creede, she worked exclusively in Dr. Harbert’s clinic and saw a wide variety of patients.

Hurley spent the other two days of the week with Kristina Steinberg, MD, of Alamosa as her preceptor. There she saw patients both in the clinic and at the San Luis Valley Regional Medical Center in Alamosa, which is in south-central Colorado. Dr. Steinberg spends much of her time on women’s health issues and Hurley was able to observe some deliveries.

“I definitely got some exposure, which is great,” she said. “I was able to see the scope of practice.” In particular, she said she saw that she could narrow her practice, as Dr. Steinberg does, or broaden it, as Dr. Harbert does. “It opened my eyes to the possibility,” she said.

Having grown up in Monte Vista, Colo., Hurley is comfortable with small town life. “I like small-town people and culture,” she said. During the Alamosa portion of her preceptorship, she stayed with her parents who are both health care providers. Her father was a Family Physician and is now an emergency room doctor at San Luis Valley Regional Medical Center.

Even though she grew up in a medical family in a rural setting, she said the summer preceptorship opened her eyes to the need to strike a balance between being accessible to patients and having a personal life. She can see that it may be difficult for doctors to “set boundaries with their patients and families while being realistic and taking care of themselves.”

She said, “I knew there were challenges from seeing my dad, but I really didn’t understand them.” She feels she will now “go into medicine with better awareness of what to expect.”

A special experience for Hurley came on her last day in the clinic in Creede when, under Dr. Harbert’s close supervision and moment-by-moment guidance, she removed a BB from a patient’s head. They called the procedure a “Bbectomy.” Hurley said, “We created a new name for a new procedure. It was a minor procedure, but it was very exciting for me.”

In December 2008, Hurley married Ely Walker, who is from the small community of Walsh in southeast Colorado and is a year ahead of her in the Rural Track program. He is taking a year off between his third and fourth years of medical school so they can match together for their residencies.