During the summer of 2009, medical student Asa Ware observed complicated medical procedures and assisted with simpler ones in Wray, Colo. The activities were part of his studies in the Rural Track of the University of Colorado School of Medicine.

Ware helped remove a fishhook from a youngster’s finger. At first, he said the patient “really liked the lure” and efforts were made to preserve it, but as the procedure unfolded, the youngster just wanted to be finished. Eventually, the lure was sacrificed and the patient was fine.

Another case involved removal of a cactus needle from a gardener’s tongue. Ware said, “I still don’t know why she brought the gloved hand up to her mouth, but she did, and she subsequently got a thorn in her tongue.”

And, he saw two rattlesnake bites within 24 hours. One patient was a farmer who encountered the snake in the field. The other was a young woman. “Apparently, she has always loved picking up snakes and playing with them, so she sees a snake – it was a baby rattler, so it didn’t have the rattles – and picks it up and she’s swinging it around and watching it coil up on her hand, and it bit her twice.” With a high demand in a short time, anti-venom had to be gathered from nearby, Ware said. “After working there, my thought was reinforced.”

Located in northeastern Colorado, Wray is just nine miles from Kansas and 12 from Nebraska. (Growing up, Ware would go bowling in Kansas.) The 16-bed Wray Community District Hospital and an adjacent clinic serve not only approximately 2,200 people who live in Wray, but also those in the surrounding agricultural area. Facilities include a cardiac rehabilitation clinic and a clinic where visiting specialists – in at least 10 disciplines ranging from dermatology to urology and oncology to orthopedics – come for consultations and to see patients.

Additional facilities and services are wide ranging and include MRIs, which are available twice a month in a semi truck. The Wray Rehabilitation and Activity Center serves as both a recreation center and a site for physical therapy. Ware reported that more lab work is done in Wray than is typical for a town of 2,200. Similar communities more frequently send specimens away for analysis.

The medical community includes three Family Physicians and a general surgeon, who divides his time between Wray and nearby Yuma. Also on staff are two physician assistants, one to two residents, two nurse anesthetists and approximately 25 nursing staff.

Ware’s primary preceptor was Monte Uyemura, MD, but he also got to work with the other Family Physicians and physician’s assistants.

“I coached Asa in Little League baseball, and now I considered it a privilege to be involved in Asa’s medical training. He is extremely bright and just an all-around mature and classy young man,” Dr. Uyemura stated. “I think it is vital to train and encourage students like Asa to become rural Family Physicians. In fact, I believe we need more rural Family Physicians with their broad scope of practice and small-town rapport in every town and scattered in our big cities.”

On the very day that he began in the program, Ware found himself performing chest compressions on a dying patient. But, he said, most days ran more routinely. Typically, they began at 8 a.m. with reports, followed by obstetrical ultrasounds, which were always done in the morning. Seeing patients in the clinic, which houses 16 exam rooms and two procedure rooms, filled most of the day, lasting from 8:30 a.m. until 5 p.m. or later.

In all, Ware assisted with 11 obstetrical ultrasounds, 25 well-child checkups and 21 obstetrical visits. He completed 67 one-on-one interviews with patients. Among the procedures he saw were a total hip replacement, Caesarian sections, laparoscopic gall bladder surgery, removal of lesions and moles and stress tests.

One problem Ware observed was a gap in home services. He said home care is available, but the “middle ground,” where someone just needs help with things like taking out the garbage, is missing.

In addition to his work, Ware also participated in community activities, including the annual Wray Daze, which attracts many expatriates. The event includes a parade with “a lot of tractors,” he said, as well as a children’s bicycle race and rubber duck race in the Republican River.

Ware doesn’t know where he will practice after he graduates from medical school, saying, “I am certainly interested in rural medicine, and Wray is a place that’s constantly on my mind,” he said. “It would be an honor to give back to a community that has given so much to me.”

The following is the seventh 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.