What's an AHEC?

by Jack Westfall, MD, MPH
Colorado AHEC Director

The United States Congress created the national Area Health Education Centers (AHEC) Programs in 1971 as part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA). The AHECs were created to link the resources of university health science centers with local planning, educational and clinical resources. Today, this network of health-related institutions provides multidisciplinary educational services to students, faculty and local practitioners, ultimately improving healthcare delivery in medically underserved areas throughout our nation.

The Colorado Area Health Education Centers were established in 1977 as an academic-community partnership involving University of Colorado Denver and community-based non-profit AHEC offices, each serving a designated region of the State. The mission of the Colorado AHEC is to improve the quality and quantity of education to healthcare providers in Colorado in order to enhance the delivery of healthcare services throughout the State, with special emphasis on frontier, rural and urban communities and minority populations. The Colorado AHEC office and the five regional AHEC offices serve as liaisons between the University of Colorado Denver and local communities to develop educational outreach and support systems from UCD, and link University resources with local planning, educational and clinical resources.

So that's the official version of an AHEC.

But what does an AHEC really do?

The Area Health Education Centers situated around the state provide a host of educational and public health services all over Colorado. The AHEC provides housing for students from our health professions schools. An AHEC provides home visits to a frail elderly man in San Luis Valley. An AHEC teaches nurses and radiology techs the best evidence-based practice. An AHEC helps implement a new clinical campus for medical students. An AHEC brings high school students from all over Colorado to the health sciences center campus to learn about health careers.

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Thank you to the National Western Stock Show Foundation for scholarship support for Rural Track Medical Students, Physician Assistant Students, and Family Medicine Residents.

-Jack Westfall
Colorado AHEC Director

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2008 Summer Health Career Institute

The Summer Health Careers Institute is an intensive one-week immersion into healthcare career exploration for high school sophomores and juniors interested in pursuing healthcare careers – or at least further exploring the possibilities of a career in healthcare.

During the Institute, each student is assigned a job shadow. This experience is always the highlight of the week. Students are paired with a physician, nurse or other healthcare professional for the day to experience life in a health career.

If you or someone you know is interested in participating in the 2008 Summer Health Career Institute as either a student or as a Job Shadow Host, please contact Debra Schluter, (303) 724-0329 or debra@centralcoahec.org.

Simulation in Nursing

The Central Colorado AHEC is happy to work in conjunction with the WELLS Center to bring an innovative and exciting high-tech educational experience to medical professionals in Colorado:

The Wellness Education Life-long Learning Center (WELLS Center) is located on the Anschutz campus of the University of Colorado Denver and Health Sciences Center. They offer simulations using mannequins which are computer programmed to speak, breathe and even reflect heart rate changes on the monitor according to the scenario written by medical and nursing experts. These simulations are useful for both students and practitioners of all types to participate in medical scenarios to hone their skills and critical thinking in order to care for live patients better. Even non-medical professionals can benefit from this type of experience. At a conference in February at the WELLS Center, teachers and counselors from around Colorado responded to a “bee-sting” scenario that took place on an imaginary playground. They had to react quickly to the information that the “students” gave them about an unresponsive “child” lying on the ground near a “slide.” A cell phone call to 911 and the injection of an “epi-pen” saved a life and prompted many questions about how a real allergic reaction would be handled at school, along with comments about changing policies.

For further information about programs at the WELLS Center please email Michelle Cheuvront at WELLS_admin@ColoradoNursingCenter.org or Gloria Nussbaum at gloria@centralcoahec.org.

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Caring For Colorado Oral Health Initiative

The Centennial AHEC office, working with local health departments and the Plains Medical Center in Limon, is currently taking part in the Caring for Colorado Oral Health Initiative. The Oral Health Initiative is designed to improve the oral health of uninsured and under-insured children ages 3 to 8, in Lincoln, Kit Carson and Cheyenne Counties. Objectives of the program include:

- Conducting oral health educational sessions for 250 parents/guardians of pre-school and K-2 students.
- Conducting oral health educational sessions for 450 pre-school and K-2 students.
- Screening children in 250 pre-school and second grades for dental disease.
- Providing fluoride varnishes for 150 pre-school and 100 second-grade children.
- Providing dental sealants to 100 second-graders as recommended by the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE)'s Be Smart and Seal Them program (four first molars/child).

As of October 31, 2007, 430 children had been screened, and had fluoride varnish applied.

Colorado Trust Partnership for Health Initiative

In partnership with other agencies in Lincoln, Kit Carson and Cheyenne Counties (local health departments, hospitals, schools, and mental health and social services agencies), the Centennial AHEC office is participating in the Colorado Trust Partnership for Health Initiative. The goals of the Health Initiative include improving the overall wellness of community members by improving nutrition and physical activity choices.

Plans are underway to identify a nutrition curriculum for elementary school children that meets CSAP standards, and train teachers to implement the curriculum, as well as providing nutrition information to parents/caregivers. In addition, a 4H program focused on nutrition and a nutrition component for area parenting classes are being developed. Programs designed to target area seniors involve preparing nutritious meals together, both to improve nutrition and reduce social isolation. Finally, a walking program is planned to encourage physical activity in area residents.

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SLVAHEC Update

The San Luis Valley Area Health Education Center (SLV-AHEC) has been quite busy administering education workshops to the health care professionals in the San Luis Valley, as well as managing such programs as the Health-e computer Kiosk project, providing technical assistance to The Colorado Trust Health Professionals Initiative grantees, maintaining an Epilepsy Education Materials Library and networking and advocating with the health care community in providing an effective education service delivery vehicle. This is quite common among all five AHECs in Colorado.

The SLV-AHEC, however, does administer a unique program serving the elderly. The In-Home Chores Program for the Elderly serves the elderly who are needy in the San Luis Valley. The purpose of this program is to offer services that will help the impaired elderly remain in their homes, including heavy household tasks such as shampooing carpets, removing and cleaning drapes, cleaning ovens, yard care, snow removal, painting and minor repairs, and other household work which older persons are unable to perform for themselves. The services of a trained homemaker are not required. This program has proven to allow numerous impaired elderly to remain living in their homes independently and with dignity before the inevitable step of moving into a nursing home.

Another exciting program which is being revived at the SLV-AHEC is a summer high school student health careers program entitled “Grow Your Own” Summer Health Careers Institute and Student Health Careers Guild. This is an evidence-based program which identifies, selects, enrolls, educates and tracks high school students in the pursuit of health careers. It will commence on Sunday, June 15, 2008 and continue through the entire regular school year thereafter. It is designed to work with high school students from the San Luis Valley in an academic environment for a summer and the subsequent school year.

The SLV-AHEC has been unable to conduct this comprehensive summer program since summer 2003, due to lack of funding. Requests for program funding are currently submitted which will allow the SLV-AHEC to continue this dynamic and educational summer youth program. This proposed program will work with high school students interested in health careers through a longitudinal format eventually guiding the student to post-secondary education.

Beginning June 2008, the first six weeks will entail the following: Week # 1: Lectures from health professionals and Adams State College professors with labs, intensive hands-on activities and recreational activities at Adams State College.
The students will live in the college dorms with live-in counselors providing them a college campus experience. Week # 2: Lectures and demonstrations from health professionals and field trips conducted by the University of Colorado at Denver Health Sciences Center. The students will live at Christian University Campus. Weeks # 3 through 6: On the Job Training at medical-related facilities in the San Luis Valley. After completion of 160 hours paid Work Experience Program through Rocky Mountain SER /Jobs for Progress and program scholarships, the students will return to school for their regular school year.

A new addition to the Summer Health Careers Institute is the Student Health Careers Guild. The Student Health Careers Guild is the “missing link” of the great work initiated by the Summer Health Careers Institute. The Summer Health Careers Institute has a great impact on students’ awareness of possible health careers fields. The Student Health Careers Guild will compliment the summer program by staying connected to the same students while they are in their regular school year.

At the very least, monthly contacts with the students regarding their academics and off-school activities will be made. Quarterly face-to-face activities will be planned in the support and nurturing of the students’ continued school academics and pursuit in health careers. Research shows that a model of student success indicators includes the student’s parent(s). Thus, parents will become a significant element of the Student Health Careers Guild. Where possible, academic school credit from the students’ respective schools will be pursued for their work in this project if they successfully complete all assigned work by May, 2009.

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The Great Hospital Adventure

The Southeastern Colorado Area Health Education Center (SECAHEC) is proud to offer our FREE program for Pre-K through 3rd grade. A unique way to introduce young minds to health care careers, The Great Hospital Adventure provides children in pre-school through second grade (ages 4-9) basic information on health care and health professions, while reinforcing healthy behaviors.

The Great Hospital Adventure combines video, puppets (who are the “stars” of the program), and a story coloring book to reinforce career concepts and health habits. In addition, the program is designed to help reduce children’s fears about the people that they might encounter in the health care system.

The Great Hospital Adventure can also be used at the middle and high school levels as a way for those students to learn about and promote health careers by presenting the program to younger audiences.

Since The Great Hospital Adventure made its debut in southeastern Colorado in January 2007, over 3,000 students at 25 area schools have been introduced to the world of health care professions through the Health Career Puppet Bunch's story.

Tar Wars

SECAHEC is partnering with the Colorado Academy of Physicians Foundation to bring the nationally acclaimed Tar Wars tobacco education program to 5th-grade classrooms throughout southeastern Colorado.

Developed at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science in 1988, the Tar Wars program in a one-hour lesson that focuses on the short-term effects of tobacco use, the reason people use tobacco, and the images that tobacco companies use to market their products.

Tar Wars provides an opportunity for health care providers, school personnel and community members to form coalitions towards the common goal of discouraging tobacco use among youth. In 2006, over 161 schools and 12,000 children in Colorado were reached through the program.

To schedule Tar Wars for your school, please contact Tina Goldstein, the Colorado Tar Wars director, at (303) 696-6655 x14.

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Delta Middle School Project

The Delta Middle School project is a program teaching sixth, seventh and eighth grade students about Health Careers. Students explore careers, create learning projects about the careers being studied, and visit with guest speakers who are in the professions. The program is embedded in the Science Curriculum of Delta Middle School which ensures its sustainability over time. This project will be spotlighted by the Society for Teachers of Family Medicine over the next 12 months. It will ultimately become part of a continuum of educational programs that go from Kindergarten through High School, and possibly beyond.

Delta Middle School Teachers have begun teaching the modules they developed last year, and we are meeting to determine next steps for the project, which will become an integral part of the larger pipeline project under development. Delta Hospital has come on board enthusiastically as a sponsor, and we are working with Kathy Scramek, Director of Education, to map what that will look like as we go forward. The Society of Teachers of Family Medicine (STFM) has chosen this project as one they will spotlight for the next 12 months.

We are collaborating with Kristy Reuss, MD on her Mesa Academy of Summer Health (MASH) Camp for middle school students, and will provide staff help in the way of camp counselors during the week-long program. The design of a Western Region High School MASH Camp is underway in collaboration with Dr. Reuss. This is planned as part of a summer-long program for high school students that is also under development, with an anticipated roll-out in summer of 2008.

Student Rotation Housing

The Western Colorado AHEC (WCAHEC) office has a new coordinator for student housing, Sarah Starwalt. Sarah, along with Natasha Schumann, oversees housing for students participating in clinical rotations in the WCAHEC region. Sarah was instrumental in setting up a number of new hosts, including Rifle, Vail, Glenwood Springs, Montrose, Steamboat Springs, Pagosa Springs and Cortez, all areas where housing is extremely hard to find. At this point, we have 18 University of Colorado students doing rotations. We also housed Osteopathic students during this past six months, and we plan to continue to grow this aspect of housing. Housing requests for the Western Slope continue to grow, and this trend is expected to continue into the future.

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But what does an AHEC really do? continued...

And an AHEC helps educate community members about heart disease risks. An AHEC helps provide oral health to children in rural Colorado. The AHECs honor excellence in nursing with the Nightingale awards. An AHEC helps teach physicians how to perform colonoscopy. And does puppet shows about health careers for elementary school kids, and helps provide asthma education to physician offices. And…and…and…

An AHEC is a teacher, a researcher, a student, a doctor, nurse, pharmacist, dentist, a public health worker, a community advocate, a mother, father, grandma, sibling, child. An AHEC is part of our community; part of your community. AHEC represents the best in caring and educating, training and evaluating, learning and acting.

I recently heard an AHEC Director say, “AHEC is America’s best kept healthcare secret.” I think that’s right. Most folks don’t really know about their local AHEC; most don’t know about the terrific work their AHEC is doing. But I think most people in Colorado are benefiting from the work of their AHEC. I think the AHEC must directly or indirectly impact nearly all of Colorado. So, if your child comes home excited about a health career, you may want to thank your local AHEC. If your physician knows the latest on asthma or COPD care, you may want to thank your AHEC. If your nurse provides the best care, you may want to thank the AHEC (and nominate her for a Nightingale award.) If you learn about your high blood pressure at the local bank or community center, you may want to thank your AHEC.

I am honored to be part of the Colorado AHEC. It is a pleasure to come to work and be part of the great things the AHEC is doing. Look around for your AHEC. Look through this newsletter to get a glimpse of just a few of the programs the AHECs are doing. Call your AHEC. Use your AHEC. Live healthy, live long.

-Jack Westfall, MD, MPH
Colorado AHEC Director