

## **North Country HealthCare Addresses the Primary Care Physician Shortage One Graduate at a Time**

In the fall of 2007, a group of 10 AT Still University School of Osteopathic Medicine students made the transition from life in Mesa to life in Flagstaff. These students didn't relocate to Flagstaff for the beautiful scenery or the great fall weather; they moved to complete their medical training at North Country HealthCare as the first class of the AT Still North Country Community Campus program.

North Country HealthCare serves as an AT Still Community Campus which is designed for second, third and fourth year medical students to complete their medical training. The mission is to attract students to practice in medically underserved communities, many of which fall in North Country HealthCare's service area.

The partnership came about to address the physician shortage that we are facing across the nation. Nationwide, approximately 25% of medical school graduates choose to pursue a career in primary care. The shortage of primary care physicians poses a real problem in many rural communities throughout northern Arizona. This may be because fewer medical schools and residency programs are graduating primary care physicians. Evidence shows that health professionals are more likely to practice in the communities where they were trained. To date, northern Arizona has had little in the way of physician training. By bringing these students to Flagstaff, North Country HealthCare allows them to connect with our communities, the northern Arizona healthcare systems and the community health center network.

Today, North Country HealthCare serves as the teaching home to 30 medical students. The students spend their time between the classroom, studying, observing/participating in clinical settings with medical providers who serve as preceptors (or mentors) and taking exams. Students spend 10-15 hours per week in class and 25-60 hours studying. In addition, they spend eight hours each week working alongside medical providers in various departments at North Country HealthCare and in other clinical sites around Flagstaff. Second year students also take part in a year-long community project which focuses on aspects of rural medicine. At the end of the school year, all students must take and pass a national board exam before being promoted to their third year of medical school.

In the third and fourth years of the program, medical students spend up to 80 hours each week engaged in four to eight week clerkships where they are assigned to experienced medical providers in each of 10 core subject areas. Students also schedule elective blocks where they spend time with providers in an area of medicine of most interest to them. These hands-on experiences and further study time are followed by additional testing and preparation for new national board exams. The third and fourth year students also take part in monthly Grand Rounds sessions where they learn how to prepare and present clinical cases and discuss professionalism and ethics in the medical world.

In 2011 and 2012, 19 students graduated from the AT Still's North Country Community Campus program. Of those 19, 68% (compared to 25% nationally) chose to practice primary care (family medicine, internal medicine and pediatrics). Together, AT Still University School of Osteopathic Medicine and North Country HealthCare hope to address the primary care physician shortage one graduate at a time.

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