

Valley patients win in expansion of medical residency programs

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Residents in blue scrubs receive instruction through the UCSF Fresno Center for Medical Education and Research. As the second open enrollment period for health insurance comes to a close, the number of Central Valley residents with medical coverage continues to increase, stressing local hospitals and rural health care clinics. The region already faces a chronic shortage of trained physicians and the newly insured have prompted health care groups to expand and create new medical residency programs.

“Studies show that about 50 percent of residents end up staying in the area where they were trained,” said Dr. Lori Winston, designated institutional official with Kaweah Delta Health Care District's residency programs.

It's therefore in the region's best interest to host more residency programs, she said. Kaweah Delta first began offering residency training in 2013 and has since expanded to host five programs, including its surgery residency-training program that welcomes its first cohort this July. Plans are also in the works to add Ob-Gyn, internal medicine and orthopedics programs.

“It was a pretty big cultural change to go from just a hospital to focusing on training and recruitment,” Winston said. “The district has really gotten a good response and already we have recruited so many faculty and residents.”

While the region needs more physicians in all aspects of medicine, the industry is seeing the most demand for general practitioners. The growing need for these services is a result of federal health insurance legislation providing more Californians with access to coverage, giving rise to the number of insured in the region.

Kaweah Delta's family medicine track is one of several residency programs throughout the region seeking to meet

increased demand. The program trains 18 residents and operates at both the hospital and new family medicine center in Visalia.

Rural clinics have also been hit hard with waves of newly insured, and Dr. Romeo Castillo, program director for Adventist Health Hanford Family Practice Residency Program, said the group tries hard to accept only residents who are likely to remain in the Central Valley upon completion of their medical training.

“We have a 75-percent retention rate,” he said. “We make it very clear to the applicants that we would like them to stay here.”

Adventist has several hospital and clinic locations throughout the region, including Selma, Parlier, Reedley, Lemoore and Taft. The Hanford center started its program in 2005 with two residents but has since expanded its three-year program to train 12.

Unlike the block training rotations used in most other residency programs, residents at the Hanford site receive longitudinal training that allows them to stay in their specialties for two of their three years.

Castillo said this approach is designed to mimic the actual clinical setting and provide residents with better real-world training for their rural communities.

“We’re catering to a population that is underserved and uninsured,” he said. “Our training is therefore very diverse.”

While many previously uninsured residents have recently been able to qualify for MediCal and other government funded health care coverage, the number of physicians able to see those patients is expected to decrease throughout the next year, said Dr. Michael Peterson, interim associate dean at UCSF Fresno. Going forward, the federal government will reduce funding for physicians who accept MediCal.

“Those first two years, we saw a significant increase in the number of doctors being able to see patients with MediCal,” he said. “I see it going back down soon.”

Those financial incentives won’t change the growing need for trained physicians in the Central Valley, however, and Peterson said UCSF Fresno will continue to work with community health care groups to train medical residents and fellows.

The group has 250 residents and 50 fellows who train at facilities throughout the area, including Community Medical Centers, the VA Hospital, Kaiser Permanente Fresno and Saint Agnes Medical Center. Peterson said 35 to 40 percent of residents and fellows have some sort of family or personal connection to the Central Valley, and UCSF Fresno currently has a 40-percent retention rate.

UCSF Fresno has eight residency programs and fellowships focusing on 17 different sub-specialties, including internal medicine, general surgery and sleep medicine. The organization also offers pediatrics training and has partnered with Valley Children's Hospital for the past 40 years to help train residents.

Recently, Valley Children's Hospital declared its intent to create its own pediatric residential and fellowship training programs, putting an expiration date on its relationship with UCSF Fresno.

“We feel like it’s really our responsibility to expand the opportunities for training in the Central Valley,” said David Christensen, chief medical officer for Valley Children's. “We’ll also be looking into starting our own fellowship programs for subspecialties such as pediatric surgery.”

The hospital will continue to help train its 36 UCSF Fresno pediatric residents until its own program is up and running. The accreditation and approval process will take time, however, and Christensen estimated that Children’s wouldn’t welcome its own residents until July 2016.

“That’s really a best-case scenario,” he said. “Our goal is to move as fast as we can, but these things take time.”

The dissolution of the partnership with Valley Children’s has led to increased ties between Community Medical Centers and UCSF Fresno, and Peterson said the Fresno-based hospital group is expected to increase its pediatric offerings.

While the creation of new residency programs means the local health care scene may become more competitive, Winston said Central Valley residents are ultimately the winners.

“It’s really in everyone’s best interest to train more doctors,” she said. “The communities are really the ones who benefit from expanding programs.”

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