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AHEC Review

North Carolina Area Health Education Centers Program
creating a better state of health
Spring 2009

Touched by an AHEC: Stories from Across the State

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Director's Message

We are living and working in challenging times. Each day we are faced with the news of additional job cuts, rising unemployment and a serious erosion in local, state and federal revenues. Here in North Carolina, Governor Perdue and the General Assembly are grappling with filling a $2-$3 billion budget hole, and all state programs have received substantial reductions in funding.

As a result of this challenging financial situation, programs are having to be postponed or cut back, we are having to raise fees for some services, and we are looking at every way possible to maximize our efficiencies as a state AHEC program. As I have been visiting AHECs the last several months, however, I have been impressed with the spirit of our staff, their continued commitment to our mission and programs, and the very creative ways they are managing to maintain high quality services in the midst of reduced resources.

In this issue we unveil a new tagline for the state AHEC Program: "Creating a Better State of Health." It is important in difficult times such as these that we stay focused on the message of this new tagline, so that we wisely use our resources most effectively to develop programs and services that will ultimately lead to a better state of health for the people of North Carolina. When all is said and done, what the AHEC Program is about is educating students, residents and health professionals in order to improve access to high quality health care for North Carolinians. In this issue we also unveil a new Web site called *Touched by an AHEC: Stories from Across the State*. *Touched by an AHEC* gives us an opportunity to highlight some of the stories of students and health practitioners who have been touched by AHEC programs and services and who are now contributing to a better state of health in their own communities. We invite you to go to that Web site (www.ncahec.net/stories) and see some of the stories that have been collected by the AHECs.

As we work through this challenging time, we welcome your ideas and suggestions about how we can most effectively meet the health workforce needs of North Carolina. I know I speak for all of the faculty and staff across the AHEC system in saying that we remain committed to getting through this tough time with even stronger programs designed to meet the health workforce needs of the communities of the state.

Thomas J. Bacon, DrPH
Director, NC AHEC Program

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NC Dentist supply down

After four years of moderate increases, the state's supply of dentists per capita took a downward turn this past year, according to recently released data from the North Carolina Health Professions Data System at UNC-Chapel Hill. The report, entitled "The North Carolina Health Professions 2007 Data Book" is part of an annual review of the state's supply of health professionals.

According to the report, between 2003-2004, the dentist workforce grew by 4.8%, but from 2006-2007, it increased by only 1.6%. Adjusted for population, these increases translate into a 3.9% increase between 2003-2004 and a 0.7% decrease between 2006-2007.

North Carolina had 4.3 dentists per 10,000 population in 2007 compared to the US ratio of 6.1. Four counties in eastern North Carolina – Camden, Gates, Hyde, and Tyrrell – did not have an active dentist in 2007, and Camden and Tyrrell haven't had a dentist since data collection began 1979.

"The fact that our dentist supply is not keeping pace with population growth is of concern and a trend worth further monitoring," said Erin Fraher, director of the Health Professions Data System. "North Carolina already lags behind the nation in dentist supply and we have an aging dentist workforce with nearly one in three dentists aged 55 and over. As this cohort begins to retire, it is likely that supply will contract at an even faster rate and some counties, particularly rural ones where dentists are an average three years older, may be left without a dentist in practice," noted Fraher.

Although the legislature approved a new dental school at East Carolina University and an increase in enrollments at the dental school at UNC-Chapel Hill, these additional graduates will not enter the workforce until 2015 and 2016 respectively.

After adjusting for population growth, NC's supply of physicians, nurses, and pharmacists increased while the supply of physicians in primary care specialties declined slightly in the same period. Physician assistants (PAs) and nurse practitioners (NPs) grew at the fastest rate relative to population, increasing by 8.1% and 11.1% respectively.

The North Carolina Health Professions 2007 Data Book contains county-level data for 19 health professions. For 30 years, the Health Professions Data System at the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research has produced an annual report on the supply of licensed health care professionals in North Carolina. Monitoring of the state's health professional supply is supported by the NC AHEC Program and the UNC Office of the Provost. Data for the report are provided by the health professions licensing boards.

Data are available in electronic format at the Sheps Center's Health Professions Data System website (http://www.shepscenter.unc.edu/hp). To order the 2007 edition contact nchp@unc.edu or (919) 966-7112.

Touched by an AHEC

For more than 35 years, the North Carolina AHEC Program has worked to create a better state of health for North Carolinians in all 100 counties of the state. Out of the thousands who have been touched by a program or person connected with AHEC, we have begun gathering stories that we hope will help describe our efforts.

Touched by an AHEC: Stories from Across the State is a new Web publication (www.ncahec.net/stories) that features the inspiring people, places, and programs that have been directly affected by the nine AHECs serving the 100 counties of North Carolina. The following excerpts are a glimpse of the growing collection of accounts that are featured on our Web site – visit the site to see the full story and more. If you have been touched by an AHEC and would like to share your story, please e-mail us at ncahec@med.unc.edu.

Kathy Waters, director of school/community partnerships (retired); advocate for rural, underserved area, Washington County, Eastern AHEC

"In Spring 2008, I retired after a long career with Washington County Schools. One of the most positive experiences in my role with the district was the many wonderful people I had an opportunity to work with in partnership with the schools over the years.

"Eastern AHEC is the perfect example of this. I cannot remember any time or situation when I contacted a member of the EAHEC team for a variety of assistance that they did not respond in a timely and extremely professional manner. I have always seen AHEC as synonymous with proficiency and professionalism..."

Joel Miller, MD, Ob/Gyn at Catawba Women's Center, Hickory, Catawba County, Northwest AHEC

"I have certainly been more than touched by an AHEC. For me it's not just having been touched; my whole professional career as it has developed over the past 30 years is because of AHEC.

"In 1977 I was the first Ob/Gyn resident from NC Baptist Hospital/Bowman Gray School of Medicine to come to Catawba Memorial Hospital (now Catawba Valley Medical Center) in Hickory for a new AHEC-sponsored residency program. Starting then, third year residents each came to Hickory for about 2 1/2 months. It was a wonderful rotation with lots of experience and training in a community setting outside the 'ivory tower' medical center.

"The reason AHEC has more than 'touched' my career is that while I was doing my rotation in Hickory, I met the physicians from the group with which I have practiced for the last 30 years, Catawba Women's Center. After my rotation they offered me a position in their practice. Having worked with them gave me a tremendous advantage when choosing my future practice and medical community. It's all worked out very well and here I am 30 years later still being touched by our AHEC facility in Hickory..."

Suzanne Collins, RN, MS, CWOCN at Carolinas Medical Center – RN Refresher Program, Mecklenburg County, Charlotte AHEC

"Emergencies happen. The fastest way I could respond was to get back to work through the AHEC Nurse Refresher Program, a well-organized and structured re-entry into basic nursing practice. I will never forget the support and respectful optimism provided by Nancy Fiedler, the staff at AHEC, and all whom I met as preceptors on my Medical Unit.

"I thank God for nursing. And for the Nurse Refresher Program at AHEC..."

Valarie Farnum, parent, teacher, and club adviser for after-school program, Columbus County, South East AHEC

As a parent, a teacher and an adviser for an after-school program, Valarie Farnum has been touched by South East AHEC (SEAHEC) in a number of ways. "Presently, I'm involved with AHEC more as an adviser for East Columbus High School ROCAME Club (Region "O" Council for the Advancement of Minorities in Engineering)," she said. "Some of our club members attended AHEC's 2008 Future Leaders in Healthcare Conference at East Carolina University, and ROCAME Club members were in attendance for this summer's SAT workshop with Dr. Aicher.

"One of the many benefits of our club involvement with AHEC is the opportunity for students to connect with like minds from outside their own community. Meeting new friends as a result of multi-county field trips provides another layer of exposure for students. They begin to see a much more global sense of the need to work together and that people can come together..."

Improving Care for Persons with Developmental Disabilities, Buncombe, Pitt, Guilford, Macon and Burke Counties, Mountain AHEC

When MAHEC initiated a three-year project on Improving Primary Care for Persons with Developmental Disabilities in the fall of 2004, little did anyone know the wave of work the project would create...or the lives that would be touched. Funded by the NC Council on Developmental Disabilities, with in-kind and cash contributions from MAHEC, the initiative began as most do, with a period of research and informative interviews. Very quickly it became apparent to the original project leaders, Robert Weaver and Irene Jurczyk, that the most underserved among those with developmental disabilities are adults.

The informed interviews and research included a (perhaps first-time ever) live teleconference of sixty-some adults, most with mild to moderate cognitive disabilities. What did they have to say about the level of care they were receiving? It was a powerful event which took place simultaneously in Franklin, Shelby and Asheville. And what was learned was that they wanted to be heard...

Debra C. Allen and Peter Gal, Asthma Clinic, Rockingham County, Greensboro AHEC

Debra Allen, ANP/GNP, is the nurse practitioner for the Rockingham County Health Department located in Wentworth, NC. One of the specialty clinics offered to patients of Rockingham County is the Asthma Clinic where Peter Gal, PharmD, BCPS, FCCP, FASHP, director of pharmacy research and education services for Greensboro AHEC, collaborates with Allen and other practitioners to provide care to asthma patients. For the past eleven years, Gal has provided his clinical services to the Asthma Clinic.

"Since starting the Asthma Clinic, Peter has provided expert, one on one care to asthma patients in need of a comprehensive care plan," said Allen. "Before Peter began providing his clinical services, patients did not have access to such expertise or they had to travel out of town to receive such care. All referred patients have access to this clinic regardless of their ability to pay. The Asthma Clinic continues to grow with increased referrals from myself and the other practitioners due to its positive outcomes. Peter is able to diagnose quickly and pinpoint treatments specific for each patient. Also, patients are comfortable in sharing important information, such as smoking habits, with Peter because he is approachable and non-judgmental..."

Christina Powers, DDS, pediatric dentist at FirstHealth Dental Care Centers, serving underserved populations, Moore and Hoke Counties, Southern Regional AHEC

After two AHEC rotations as a dental student with Dr. Sharon Nicholson Harrell's dentistry practice at FirstHealth Dental Care Centers, Christina Powers, DDS, recently joined the practice.

"I am a pediatric dentist now because of my association with AHEC. I am working at FirstHealth now because I had such a positive experience during rotations there as a dental student. I would love to help other dental students in the future and continue to support AHEC..."

...more stories on back cover

News Briefs

Race may play role in health care experience

by Lex Alexander, staff writer, Greensboro News & Record

Comparing the way people of different races and incomes get prescriptions may sound like an obscure bit of research.

But in Greensboro, that study has been a pilot program for a National Institutes of Health research project that will distribute tens of millions of dollars nationwide.

That larger study seeks to identify how factors such as race, sex, income, insurance status and language may interfere with people getting the health care they need. Such factors are thought to contribute to higher disease and death rates among some minority groups.

The agency wants researchers to find ways to improve communication with patients and spread those methods quickly, said Dr. Sam Cykert , chief of the internal medicine teaching program at Moses Cone Hospital.

"Our physicians are doing their best to provide quality care to an increasingly diverse population, under tight time and resource constraints, in an increasingly complex health care environment," said Deborah Young , clinical coordinator with the UNC-Chapel Hill Translational and Clinical Sciences Institute .

The research, she said, will highlight ways to better serve and treat that diverse population.

In addition to Cone and the UNC-CH medical school, the Greensboro Health Disparities Collaborative is taking part in the program. That group is researching why minorities with health conditions, insurance status, age and income similar to those of white people still often are less healthy.

The Greensboro study, called the Respectful Prescribing Study, is a first step toward understanding whether and how communication with a patient is a factor, Young said.

Between September and May, the researchers convened six focus groups totaling about 70 patients of different races, genders and insurance status.

"We wanted to know what was important to patients about getting prescriptions," Young said. "We asked if they felt they were treated differently based on insurance, race and gender."

Gina Hansen of Greensboro , a patient at the Moses Cone Family Practice Center , participated in a focus group in April.

She said participants were asked general questions about how well they thought they communicated with their doctors and more specific questions about whether they thought they were being fully informed and given options with regard to prescriptions.

Sam Cykert, MD, Greensboro AHEC

"(The moderator asked) 'Did certain medications make you feel ill? Did they work? If they didn't work, how (quick) were you in getting back to your doctor? Did you get the proper dose? How often did you stop taking your medications, and did you tell your doctor?'" Hansen recalled.

Researchers found that all the focus-group participants wanted more information about the reason for a prescription, possible side effects and costs versus benefits.

But researchers also found:

* Caucasian patients were more likely to want to share decision-making and negotiate treatment with their doctors.
* African Americans wanted more attention to basic elements such as physical exams and patient histories. They also wanted to ensure the patient understood the doctor and that the doctor understood any barriers a patient might face in following a course of treatment.
* African Americans were more likely to think that doctors were "overprescribing."
* African Americans were more likely to perceive generic drugs as inferior to brand names. As a result, Young said, African American patients are more likely to stop taking their medications because they aren't sure the drugs will work well.

Cykert said addressing these problems will mean doctors will have to take more time with patients. But he thinks they'll be willing to do so once they're informed about the issues.

The researchers will ask focus-group members for their ideas for workable solutions.

Ultimately, Cykert said, the larger National Institutes of Health program will seek ways to streamline communication and interaction among basic scientists, clinical researchers and community physicians so that findings are shared more quickly among them.

It also will find ways to allow communities to tell researchers what research is most important to them, Cykert said.

For Hansen, the experience accomplished a bit of what researchers hope the whole project will accomplish.

"I'm kind of feeling a little bit better about expressing myself in the medical community, standing up for myself where medical issues are concerned, being a little more inquisitive about medications," she said.

"I felt like this is something very important for people to know ... that somebody hears you, you know?"

UNC pharmacists, students offer flu shots to Charlotte voters

On November 4, 2008, voters at three polling sites in Charlotte rolled up their sleeves for a flu shot after casting their ballot thanks to students and faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and a local pharmacy.

The clinics were provided as part of Vote & Vax, a nationwide project that provided influenza vaccinations at hundreds polling sites across the country.

Each site was staffed by students from the UNC Eshelman School of Pharmacy as well as experienced pharmacists from Pike's Pharmacy and the Charlotte Area Health Education Center, who administered the injections.

The flu vaccines were administered after voters had cast their ballots so as not to interfere with the voting process.

"By holding the clinics at the polling sites, we definitely had a place where we were seen, and people were already going to be there to vote anyway," said Joan Settlemyer, director of pharmacy education at the Charlotte AHEC and a clinical assistant professor at the School.

The students, in their fourth year in the doctor of pharmacy program at UNC, are completing their clerkships at the Charlotte AHEC. Barbour, Settlemyer, and Jesse Pike, the owner of Pike's Pharmacy, oversaw one of the Vote & Vax sites.

Vote & Vax was organized by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Sickness Prevention Achieved through Regional Collaboration.

"I think Vote & Vax is a very creative idea," says Steve Caiola, chair of the School's Division of Pharmacy Practice and Experiential Education. "And the collaboration between our faculty, a couple of great practitioners and preceptors, and our mutual students is a model we would like to propagate everywhere across the state. There are advantages to all parties, including, most importantly, the North Carolinians whose health will benefit from such collaborative provision of a needed service."

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, approximately 36,000 people die from influenza each year in the United States. The CDCP recommends flu vaccinations for people 50 years of age and older, children between six months and 19 years old, pregnant women, people with certain chronic medical conditions, people who live in nursing homes and other long-term care facilities, and people who live with or care for those at high risk for complications from flu.

Chief Pilots Alan Fearing and Mike Benson, Medical Air Operations

Serving the State since '68

On October 29, 2008, the NC AHEC Program and UNC Medical Air Operations celebrated the 40th anniversary of UNC Medical Air Operations and honored retiring Chief Pilots Alan Fearing and Mike Benson for their combined 70 years of service to Medical Air. More than 150 guests gathered for a reception at the James M. Johnston Center for Undergraduate Education in Graham Memorial on the campus of UNC-Chapel Hill. Participants included UNC-Chapel Hill Chancellor Holden Thorp, UNC-Chapel Hill School of Medicine Dean Bill Roper, and UNC President Emeritus Bill Friday. Medical Air has flown almost 20 million passenger miles delivering clinical and educational services throughout the state with no major incidents or accidents on the ground or in the air. NC AHEC thanks Fearing, Benson, and the entire Medical Air staff for their dedication and commitment to the AHEC mission.

At left, Fearing and Benson display their service awards and a plaque presented to Medical Air by the Raleigh-Durham Air Traffic Controller Tower.

Touched by an AHEC
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Rebekah Carroway, health careers student, Wake County, Wake AHEC

"I'm a twelfth grade homeschooler. For the last three years, I have had the privilege to be a participant in the Wake AHEC Health Careers and Workforce Diversity Program. This opportunity has changed my life. Through this program, I selected my major for college, and a career for my future. Wake AHEC has provided outstanding, extremely organized role models for me as well. The leadership is great!!

"Through hands-on, one-on-one assistance, this program has exposed me to many of the various fields in the heath and medical professions. In addition, the diversity of students allowed me to meet different people and create new relationships..."

Dee Johnson, executive director, Carolina Family Health Centers, Wilson County, Area L AHEC

Carolina Family Health Centers (CFHC), headquartered in Wilson, North Carolina, provides high quality, affordable medical, dental, pharmacy, and behavioral health services for low-income families in Nash County at the Harvest Family Health Center, Edgecombe County at the Freedom Hill Community Health Center, and Wilson County at the Wilson Community Health Center. Glowing student evaluations are evidence of the fact that the clinics of CFHC serve as superb learning sites for AHEC nurse practitioner, physician assistant, medical, and pharmacy students. The training and experiences provided in these clinics are of high value to the students who always have nothing but praise for the staff and facilities.

Johnson is a former consultant for the Clinical Advisory and Consultation Network of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Region V. "Community Health Centers across the country face many challenges," she said. "I have been involved in the community health center mission for over 30 years, witness to the struggle of providing a wide range of desperately needed health care services to families whose resources do not extend to cover the basic care that most of us take for granted.

"The mission of CFHC is to provide quality health care to the people of Edgecombe, Nash and Wilson Counties with dignity and respect, regardless of financial, medical or cultural status. Area L AHEC has made our mission their mission. We are grateful every day for the ongoing support of our friends at Area L..."

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