“Poverty has a tremendous impact on health care,” said Dr. Trina von Waldner, the College’s director of the Postgraduate Continuing Education and a strong advocate for public health programs. She has developed a two-week summer program for pharmacy students to experience working in healthcare clinics set up for migrant farm workers in South Georgia. An added benefit is that the students could earn academic or internship credit while helping others. Last summer’s initial group of six second-year pharmacy students, all with a working knowledge of Spanish, had such a rewarding learning opportunity that von Waldner plans to make the outreach program an annual event.
For more than 15 years the Farm Worker Family Health Program (FWFHP) has been a community partnership designed to increase the delivery of healthcare services for migrant farm worker families. The two-week summer experience brings together more than 100 students and faculty members from five different schools and colleges; together they provide physical examinations, health screenings, physical therapy, health education, pharmacy services and dental care to some 1,000 migrant farm workers and their children at eight farm camps in the Colquitt County area.

“Since many of these people have no transportation and no insurance, they have no other access to health care without the clinics,” noted von Waldner, adding that most of the workers have work visas awarded due to the need of farm owners for a reliable work force. “Most workers are not eligible for Medicaid; they may have paid thousands to move here for work and have little money left after paying for food and lodging and sending money home to their families.”

The pharmacy students, she said, developed a two-pronged approach for providing pharmacy services for this under-served population – health education for the summer school children, and patient care at the field clinics. The students developed educational materials in English and in Spanish on diet and nutrition, hygiene, and medication safety, all specific healthcare issues that had been previously identified by the nurse practitioners who work with FWFHP.

“Skin protection, foot care and dehydration are especially problematic for many migrant workers,” said von Waldner. “Since many parents speak little or no English, their children become their primary source for healthcare information, whether reading medicine labels or assisting in the care of sick children.”

Typically each morning the pharmacy students worked at the school reviewing charts, escorting students and providing health education; they also inventoried medications and supplies, entered data into the computer, and filled prescriptions at the base pharmacy. Afternoon activities included networking with other health professions students, reviewing cases, and resting. After the sun went down they saw patients at a mobile clinic that was set up at a different farm each night; it might be midnight or later before they returned to their motel rooms.

“Getting up early for work in the school and staying in the fields late at night makes for a long day, sometimes as much as 18 hours of work,” von Waldner said. “For many of the students it was a real learning experience – some had never worked in 102-degree heat, seen gnats or experienced tornado warnings.”

More importantly, she said, the students developed a much better understanding of the impact of income and education on health and health outcomes.

“My experience working with this population changed my perception on pharmacy practice,” said pharmacy student Evelyn Cowan. “I realized that no matter how basic the drug information or counseling patients was, these patients desperately needed our time and teaching to get the most benefit from their medications and to get back to their daily lives,”

“Exploring public health issues helped the students understand the people and the problems of being without insurance and access to healthcare,” Von Waldner added, noting that the students were required to write a report on their experiences working among the farm worker population. They also developed ideas for additional educational materials and documented types of medications used, in order to create a formulary for future use in the clinics.

With six volunteers already signed up for the 2010 summer session, von Waldner has set more goals for her students; she expects to refine computer data entry and prescription filling, increase patient consultations and improve gathering of statistical data. She also plans to help the students develop a research project to determine the best treatment options for a particular healthcare need, such as skin problems, based on the workers’ lifestyle.

“Doing more to help the children is another priority, particularly by increasing their knowledge of good health practices through nutrition, diet, exercise, hygiene and safety in the home,” she added. “They are so respectful and appreciative that it makes the educational experience even more rewarding.”

Student volunteers, from left to right, front row, Diane Powell, Ashley Hannings, Clark Lee; and second row, Jake Galdo, Trina von Waldner, Evelyn Cowan and Iraida Veda.
Each night pharmacy students set up a clinic in the fields to offer convenient healthcare services to the migrant farm workers. Pictured are Diane Powell, Evelyn Cowan, an Emory nursing student and Ashley Hannings.

When UGA’s Archway Partnership contacted the College last year about including pharmacy services in the FWFHP, von Waldner saw it a great opportunity for the students and a benefit to the farm workers.

This type of cooperative partnership of public health services is noteworthy,” she said, adding that UGA partnered with Georgia State University, Emory University, Clayton State University and Darden College, along with the Ellenton Migrant Health Clinic and the Southwest Georgia Health District. The spirit of community included financial support for the students’ participation by Archway, the College’s diversity program and the Southwest Georgia Health Education Council. Area churches provided lunch each day and the College faculty, staff and students donated personal care items and funds to purchase over-the-counter medications.

“In addition, students earned internship hours or received credit in the Public Health Outreach for Pharmacy elective,” von Waldner added. “Starting in Summer 2011 they can also use the experience as part of the Introductory Pharmacy Practice Experience (IPPE) hours that are required for graduation.”

“Ultimately I would like for this program to help promote student interest in the public health field and increase enrollment in the joint Pharm.D./Masters in Public Health program that is slated to begin in Fall 2011 in conjunction with UGA’s College of Public Health,” she said.

Kudos

Dr. Brian Cummings was appointed President of the Southeast Chapter of the Society of Toxicology.

Dr. Azza El-Remessy was elected to be a Fellow of the American Heart Association Council on Basic Cardiovascular Research.

Dr. Susan Fagan was featured on the American College of Clinical Pharmacy website for her contributions to ACCP and the profession.

Dr. Keith Herist was re-elected Treasurer of the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy.

Dr. Merrill Norton was credentialed as a Certified Co-Occurring Disorders Professional Diplomate by the International Certification and Reciprocity Consortium Board and the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Certification Board of Georgia.

Dr. Greene Shepherd was elected as a Fellow of the American Academy of Clinical Toxicology.

The UGA College of Pharmacy team placed Second Runner-up in the National Community Pharmacists Association’s Pruitt-Schutte Business Plan competition. They were chosen for the Top Three competition from 29 schools for their plan on buying and improving an independent pharmacy. Both the College and its NCPhA chapter will receive $1,000. Pictured are team members Caroline Dennis, Melissa Underwood, LeAnn Walton, and Brad Kirk.