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State medical association supports med school in Idaho

The Idaho Medical Association recently showed its support for a statewide medical school, as part of a larger agenda of lobbying for better medical education in the Gem State.

IMA held its annual House of Delegates meeting in Sun Valley last week, where it passed a number of resolutions in support of medical education. The new policies were approved in light of the MGT report, which a Florida-based consulting firm compiled over the past two years to determine the urgent need for more doctors in the state.

The resolution IMA adopted pushes for better medical education and designates priorities the group intends to lobby for as an interim Legislative committee works to propose a medical school in next year's session.

IMA is pushing for the development of a four-year medical education program in Idaho or expansions of the current doctoral programs at the University of Utah and University of Washington.

The supported expansions include adding family and internal medicine, psychiatry, pediatrics, surgery and gynecology to the programs in Utah and Washington. Another part of the expansion also involves increasing the number of seats that both programs make available to doctoral students in Idaho.

"This is significant because it establishes IMA policy. It establishes priorities for IMA and medical education in Idaho, and it says that we support the development of an Idaho-based medical education program," said Susie Pouliot, IMA's chief executive officer.

Steve Coker, an orthopedic surgeon in Pocatello and IMA board trustee, said he wants the community to see the urgency behind the push for a medical school or expansion to the existing programs.

"I think a couple things need to get out," Coker said. "We're behind. That's why we did the MGT report. When I was being trained years ago, we thought there were too many doctors, but now there's a doctor shortage."

Coker e-mailed some medical facts to the Journal Tuesday in which he pointed out that the Gem State ranks 49th in the nation for the number of doctors per capita. He added that many doctors are increasingly becoming unavailable.

"I think what I would like the community to understand is that if we don't have a medical school, then don't be disappointed when you have to wait six weeks to see the doctor," he said. "And when you do get an appointment to see the doctor, you see his nurse practitioner or physician's assistant."

Many doctors are also getting older and pushing beyond 55 years of age, a factor that should be one of the main forces driving the push for more doctors in Idaho, he said.

However, Coker believes a medical school does not have to necessarily come from millions of dollars of

investments into new building infrastructure. He said the program could be a large statewide network of professors using existing facilities in Idaho's institutions.

Coker used the large number of students preparing to go to Utah and Washington as an example.

"Right now, we have a lot of pieces in place. ISU is training a lot of medical students who are going to Utah. Moscow (University of Idaho) and Boise State are already doing that with a group that's going to Seattle," he said. "They're just pieces of a bunch of different programs. ... I think it's more do-able than people think."