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The Spokesman-Review
Spokane, Washington
Tuesday Aug. 15, 2017
by Rachel Alexander
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Health care for the underserved

WSU's new medical school welcomes its freshman class with courses aimed at thriving in rural areas: teamwork, leadership and telemedicine

The day before Washington State University's inaugural class of medical students arrives on campus, Dean John Tomkowiak sat in his office signing books.

The result was a stack of 60 copies of "Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter," a popular business book destined for the first-year students at the Elson S. Floyd College of Medicine who arrive on campus this week.

It's an early gesture designed to introduce them to the college's unique approach to medicine, which places a premium on developing skills to work in teams to provide care in underserved areas.

"Culture is a really important piece of a medical school, particularly when you're taking care of patients," Tomkowiak said. The future of health care, especially in areas with a shortage of providers, is "team-based," which means good doctors also need to be good leaders.

Because it's a land-grant university, WSU leaders want its medical school to contribute to serving the parts of Washington that most need doctors.

The Washington state Department of Health keeps a list of medically underserved areas, based on the number of providers, the number of elderly residents and infant mortality rates. The map includes all of Pend Oreille, Ferry, Okanogan, Douglas, Columbia, Garfield, Asotin, Franklin and Yakima counties, as well as much of Stevens County.

"It's really important we do everything we can to meet that need," Tomkowiak said.

That focus is baked into the college, starting with the entrance requirements for new students and continuing through all four years of medical curriculum.

Prospective students must either live in Washington or be from the Evergreen State. Being born here isn't enough. Applicants need to show three of four possible ties: birth in Washington, a current parent resident, proof of living in state during childhood, or graduation from a Washington high school.

Nine of the incoming students are from rural Washington counties, and together the class hails from 15 counties across the state. Future classes should have a higher proportion of rural students, because the college only had one month to solicit applications after receiving its initial accreditation last fall.

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From the first day of class, students will learn about telemedicine and technology in medicine, topics that rural providers need to be comfortable with. They'll focus on caring for patients in a team setting and encouraging students to question processes and look for ways to improve care.

Part of that means supporting students so they don't burn themselves out. WSU has a full-time financial adviser who's contacted each student individually to talk about debt, budgeting and other financial skills.

The first week of curriculum also talks about provider wellness, and activities like mindfulness and exercise are integrated into the curriculum.

"We've tried to think proactively about what are the things they're going to be stressed about," Tomkowiak said.

In addition to the regular slate of anatomy and pharmacology classes, students will take four graduate-level leadership classes to hone their ability to work in and lead teams.

All classes are graded pass-fail, rather than on a letter-grade system or using a curve. That's something about 30 to 40 percent of medical schools now do, Tomkowiak said, and it's meant to encourage students to learn together and support each other.

"At this point in their training, it's not a competition against each other," Tomkowiak said. "We want to foster this system of teamwork."

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