MSU student doctors like working at Spectrum

Rural health program celebrated Thursday

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HAMLIN TWP. — Student doctors from Michigan State University and local doctors and staff and officials from Spectrum Health Ludington Hospital gathered Thursday to celebrate the Rural Community Health Program that matched up two of the student doctors with the hospital.

“Michigan State University is a land grant university and has a mission to serve the needs of the people of Michigan,” said Dr. Andrea Wendling, director of the Rural Community Health Program for MSU.

Wendling said the program was developed to train student physicians in rural medicine so they can return to practice in rural areas.

“This gives them a chance to learn what it’s like to be a rural doctor,” she said. “Rural communities are under served and have fewer physicians. Studies have shown the student physicians are more likely to return after graduation.”

She said program participants have already completed their second year of medical school before taking part in the program during their third and fourth years.

While in the program, the two student doctors split their time between working with local doctors in Ludington and in classes at the MSU/Community Health Program in Traverse City.

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After their graduation from medical school, the student doctors are doctors and they do their residency work for three to seven more years — depending on their specialties — before looking for permanent positions.

Wendling said MSU began a similar program for the Upper Peninsula in the 1970s and studies show that 26 percent of the students who went through that program returned to the UP to practice.

“So we’re predicting one in four,” she said about the hoped for success rate for the new program.

She also said a benefit for Ludington could occur when the hospital works to recruit doctors.

“I’ve really enjoyed it,” fourth-year medical student Georgia Wheeldon said about working in Ludington for her second year. “I really like Ludington as well and getting to know all the physicians. It’s been great.”

Wheeldon grew up in Midland and already knows she wants to practice in northern Michigan.

“I know 100 percent I would like to practice rural,” she said, adding that she wants to live in northern Michigan and on the Lake Michigan side.

“It depends on what’s open in five years when I’m done with my residency,” she said about possibly returning to the UP.

Here Wheeldon spent time working with local doctors to learn surgery, family practice, internal medicine, pediatrics and obstetrics, and she liked participating in patient care.

This is third-year medical student Carter Anderson’s first year of working in Ludington through the program.

He’s lived most of his life in East Lansing, but is now based out of the MSU campus in Traverse City.

“I’m in Traverse City to participate in the Rural Community Health Program and my wife likes Traverse City,” Anderson said.

He likes the program and working in Ludington, since July, because it gives him opportunities to work more closely with physicians than he would under other circumstances.

Anderson said he also likes the hands-on training he’s receiving from doctors with career experience, including Dr. Allan Nelson.

He learned about family medicine with Nelson and is now learning about surgery at the hospital.

“It’s been interesting to see the relationship between physicians and patients develop in a smaller community,” he said. “That knowledge over the years is really beneficial to their care. They know more about the desires and wishes of the patients than in large cities.”

Will he move back here?

“My wife would murder me if we didn’t move back to northern Michigan,” Anderson said. “I’m loving it. I feel extraordinarily lucky to be here. I’m just glad the people of Ludington want us here.”

Dr. Mandy Overmyer is a family medicine physician who has worked with both Anderson and Wheeldon.

“It’s always fun and energizing to work with the students,” she said. “It takes you back to see how their brains work to use their medical school knowledge and apply it to the medical situation.”

And Overmyer is a fan of the Rural Community Health Program.

“It’s the only way we’re going to get doctors in rural communities,” she said. “You get them here and they get the feel of taking care of patients in a small town.

“This is my home town so it was easy for me to come back,” Overmyer said. “For others, it’s probably not their first choice. I think it takes a special person to work in rural health care.”

She thinks participation in the program will help Spectrum Health Ludington Hospital with recruiting doctors.

“I’m thrilled with it,” Dr. Allan Nelson said about the program. “All of us as physicians spent time with practicing docs who spent their time helping us when we were the students. So it’s a great tradition and (the medical students) are going to teach other students when they’re older.”

Nelson said he wound up in Pentwater because he learned in Pentwater in the 1970s.

“Hopefully, some of them will come back here,” he said, adding that he hopes the program will help the hospital with recruiting.

Al Deering, who is a member of the Spectrum Health Ludington Hospital Board of Directors, also hopes participation in the program with help the hospital with recruiting.

“It’s great. Anything that can get prospective doctors working in our community will certainly help with recruitment,” Deering said. “That’s great is we have doctors who will do that.”

Deering also said MSU has a mission to serve residents of the state.

“And they’re doing it with this,” he said about the program. “They didn’t forget their mission.”