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Two New Med Schools

An osteopathic medical school in Dothan is recruiting students for its first class. Another osteopathic school is planned for Auburn. Together they say they'll reduce Alabama's shortage of rural and primary care doctors.

BY RENEÉ BUSBY

Alabama is part of a national trend that bodes ill for people in need of primary care physicians. But two new medicals schools scheduled to open in Alabama are hoping to address the problem, turning out more primary care physicians to ease the shortages in the state.

The Alabama College of Osteopathic Medicine in Dothan is recruiting students for its inaugural class to begin this August. Affiliated with Southeast Alabama Medical Center in Dothan, a 420-bed regional medical center, the school will be the first osteopathic college in Alabama.

The Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine, in Blacksburg, Va., is expected to open a branch campus in the Auburn Research Park in Auburn in the fall of 2015.

Both schools will be privately funded and will not receive any state funds, school officials say. Tuition will run about $40,000 per year.

Dothan med school opens this fall

According to the Center for Health Statistics at Alabama Department of Public Health, the primary care shortage shows only six counties have all the health care providers they need. Statewide Alabama needs 400 more primary care physicians to provide optimal care and 128 to meet minimal needs.

In 2005, a Dothan consortium was founded to study the issue and ended up partnering with other osteopathic schools in the country to train Alabama students in hopes of bringing them back to Alabama to practice medicine.

The Dothan school is expected to draw about 40 percent of its students from Alabama and 60 percent from outside the region, many of them from Georgia and Florida.

According to Philip Reynolds, associate dean for student services at the Alabama College of Osteopathic Medicine, the Dothan school had more than 2,700 applications for its first class, which will have a total of 150 students. About 50 percent of osteopathic graduates go into the primary care field, Reynolds notes, the inaugural class will significantly contribute to filling the need.

"That's going to get worse with baby boomers retiring and the shift in health care policy," he says. "We're going to need more and more primary care physicians."

A national trend shows that the osteopathic schools are helping states tackle the shortage of primary care physicians, he says.

"One of the missions of our college is to provide primary care physicians for the underserved area," says Reynolds. "All the doctors are going into practicing in larger cities and patients have to come to the city and we're trying to flip that around and get doctors in rural areas."

Working with state schools

Dr. Ronald D. Franks, vice president for health sciences at the University of South Alabama, says the school in Mobile will work to help the Dothan medical school.

"We are offering them the opportunity to do some senior electives during their senior year," says Franks, adding that USA has more elective opportunity during the senior year than USA students fill up.

The Dothan school's graduates, says Franks, also will have the opportunity to apply to USA's residency programs.

"That benefits the people of the state, as well as our residency programs," says Franks.

Overall, he says, their goal coincides with USA's goal to educate "future rural primary care physicians" and future specialists.

"That should help address the shortage of physicians in Alabama," says Franks.

He says he's also had discussions with Auburn about the possible role between USA and the new Auburn medical school.

"I don't see us competing for students," says Franks.

Auburn program

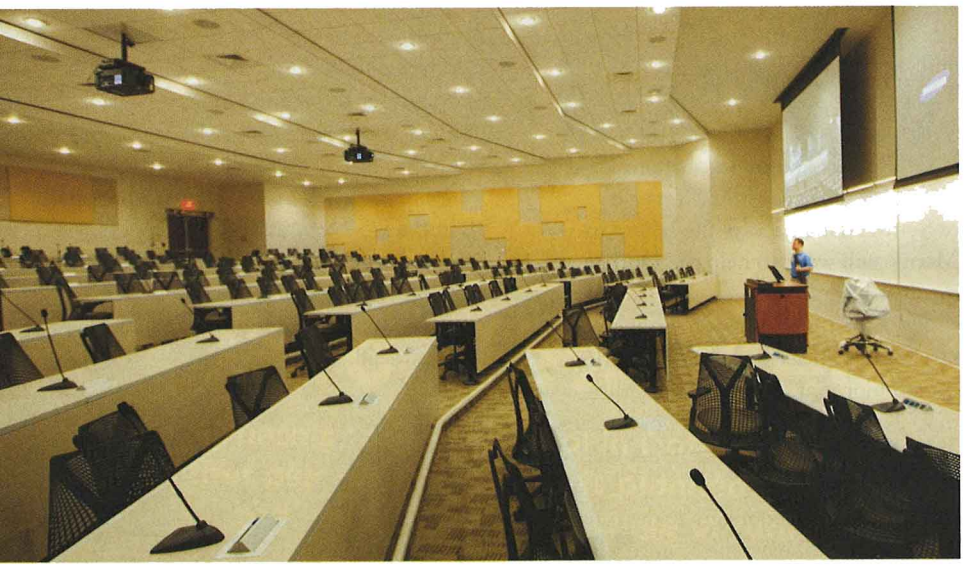
Dixie Tooke-Rawlins, dean and executive vice president of Edward Via College of Osteopathic Medicine, says that adding a new school rather than increasing the size of an existing public school will not impact the budget for the state. As a private institution, VCOM uses its own resources to build the college and to provide a positive economic impact on the community, according to the school's dean.

"The current economic impact of the VCOM campuses, when complete, is greater than $90 million per campus," says Tooke-Rawlins.

"We have seen that many students do go on to serve in rural and underserved regions as physicians, and that probably has, in part, to do with where they went to school," says William King, associate vice president for students at VCOM. "But that is not only because of our physical location but also due to our commitment in the admissions process to recruit and retain those who demonstrate a passion for serving the underserved and to serve in communities with the greatest need."

The dean says VCOM ranks in the top 10 in the US News and World Report category of schools that turn out the most primary care physicians to serve rural areas and populations that are in the greatest need.

The Alabama College of Osteopathic Medicine is almost ready for its first class, slated to start school this fall. *Photos, courtesy of ACOM, by Steve Pearce of Southeast Alabama Medical Center.*



About 20 percent of the graduates from VCOM-Virginia campus have done residencies in Virginia, but significantly over 60 percent are doing residencies throughout the Appalachian states, according to King. He says that shows many medical school graduates stay in areas similar to where they went to school.

Chairman of the VCOM Board of Directors, John G. Rocovich, says, "With a shortage of physicians in the United States, access to medical care has become more limited, especially in rural, minority and medically underserved areas."

He says VCOM and Auburn University are positioned to make an impact and meet these challenges in rural areas of Alabama.

Rocovich says one of VCOM's goals in developing a new branch campus is to provide state-of-the-art medical education and research efforts, training students who will return to practice medicine in areas with the most need.

The board chairman says the new medical school will become an integral part of the community, forming an educational partnership with area physicians, hospitals and research facilities. "The addition of a new medical school provides direct economic growth for the community, bringing new construction, staff, faculty, students and other partnership opportunities," he says.

"VCOM's presence at Auburn will provide new opportunities for excellent students who might otherwise be unable to find a spot in our already over-taxed medical education system, to become the physicians that the United States so desperately needs," says VCOM's President James Wolfe.

In another attempt to meet the need for primary care providers, especially in anticipation of increased needs under the new federal health care law, University of Alabama at Birmingham has added a new option to its physician assistant program, allowing students a choice whether to prepare as physician assistants in primary care or surgery.

Reneé Busby is a freelance writer for Business Alabama. *She lives in Mobile.*

Instructional facilities at ACOM include a standard lecture hall but also a simulation lab that lets students experience patient care in a typical hospital or physician office setting. *Photos by Steve Pearce, courtesy of ACOM*

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