School of Medicine and the Rural Track:
The Cure for Rural Colorado’s Physician Shortage
The Problem: Not Enough Physicians for Our State

There is no question about it: Colorado needs physicians in rural areas. Whether you talk to a hospital administrator in Walsenburg or a new mom in Fruita, they'll tell you there aren't enough primary care doctors in their town or even in nearby areas.

The data* tells the same story. Approximately 20 percent of Colorado’s 5 million people live in rural areas but only 9 percent of its physicians practice there. Colorado has 64 counties, 24 of which are rural and 23 are frontier. All but 12 of these counties qualify as full or partial federally designated “primary care health professional shortage areas (PCHPSA).”

Rural Bent and Washington counties have no active licensed physicians at all, according to the Colorado Health Institute (CHI). Costilla, Mineral and San Juan counties have one active physician each. Fifteen counties in Colorado have had three or fewer physicians each.

The problem is about to get worse. In 2011, the Colorado Health Institute estimated that more than a half million Coloradans—nearly one of every 10 residents—will become newly insured under the Affordable Care Act. This means Colorado will need between 71 and 117 additional primary care physicians to provide care for the newly insured. And because rural and frontier areas in Colorado already struggle with attracting primary care physicians, adding even a small number of doctors to serve these areas may become an even greater challenge.

The small towns that do have a health care provider face an additional challenge: odds are good that their physicians may soon retire or leave the community. A recent survey of the Colorado Health Institute found that of the roughly 1,300 licensed physicians in rural Colorado, 14 percent are expected to leave their practices within a year.

The Solution: The Rural Track at CU

The Rural Track at the CU School of Medicine was founded in 2005 with the goal of increasing the number of physicians who enter and remain in practice in rural Colorado.

The Rural Track supports students’ rural aspirations by providing them with extra knowledge and skills in the company of like-minded students and faculty. The Rural Track is now integral to the CU School of Medicine, and it continues to graduate students who go on to residency in primary care and then on to rural practice.

Common Sense, Access, Quality and the Bottom Line

“In rural medicine, you will be truly needed and appreciated. You can have a rich, varied, rewarding professional and personal lifestyle. From the plains to the mountains, our state offers a wealth of incredibly varied opportunities.”

Mark Deutchman, MD, Professor of Family Medicine, Director, Rural Track

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Institute of Medicine

 “… primary care is essential to reaching the objectives that constitute value in health care: high quality, ... achieving desired outcomes... patient satisfaction and efficient use of resources.”

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 “…primary care reduces costs, increases access to appropriate medical services ... and does not reduce the quality of care ...”

Institute of Medicine

Attracting the “Right” Students for Success

The Rural Track has been a great success. It attracts, admits and retains the right students; provides curriculum that gives students rural knowledge and experience; and enlists the mentorship of rural physicians committed to educating their successors.

Rural Track students typically seek the richness of life that can be found in a small-town setting, understand what rural life is like and have an interest in making their personal and professional future in a small town. Often, but not always, they grew up in and graduated from high school in a rural area.

In the summer between the first and second years, students spend a month or more working closely with a volunteer rural primary care physician, experiencing the professional work and community life of a small-town doctor. Many return to campus saying, “I was learning so much that I didn’t want to come back to classes.” Many also participate in an additional weeklong interdisciplinary rural immersion experience in conjunction with students from other professional schools including nursing, pharmacy, physician assistant, and public health programs.

The Rural Track’s success in attracting appropriate students is evidenced by the steady increase in applicants to the program. In addition, many students report that the primary reason they applied to the CU School of Medicine is because of the Rural Track.

Furthermore, students who enter the Rural Track are highly likely to remain in the track (90 percent, in fact) throughout their four years of medical school.

Rural Track Curriculum

The Rural Track’s extensive curriculum is designed to inform and reinforce students’ knowledge and interest in rural life and future practice. Compared to many rural tracks at other schools of medicine, the curriculum at the University of Colorado School of Medicine is more extensive, engages students continuously throughout their four years of school and has been cited in national legislation as a model for others. Unique elements of the curriculum include:

- During the first two years of school, students attend twice-monthly seminars on rural, medical and public health topics and workshops on medical skills.
- In the summer between the first and second years, students serve a four-week summer rural preceptorship during which they experience the personal and professional life and work of a rural physician. In addition they may participate in a week-long interdisciplinary rural immersion experience in conjunction with students from the nursing, pharmacy, physician assistant and public health programs.
- In the third year, all medical students have a four-week rural rotation; Rural Track students have the option of a 12-week rural rotation. Many complete even more of their third year rotations in rural areas. They continue to meet periodically as a group during the third year.
- In the fourth year, students have the opportunity to select some of their rotations; electives for rural rotations are also available. Rural Track students also continue to meet as a group periodically during the fourth year.
- Mentorship, as well as personal and professional advising, is offered throughout the four years of medical school.
- The Rural Track provides crucial information on scholarship and loan repayment programs.
- As the program progresses, links are being sought with communities recruiting for new physicians to help them establish contact with the pipeline of physicians-in-training. We have already collaborated with hospitals in Gunnison, Walsenburg and Montrose to develop “homegrown scholarships” for students from these communities who graduate from the Rural Track, complete their residencies and return home to practice medicine.
An Essential Part of the School of Medicine

The School of Medicine offers six different tracks for students. These areas of special emphasis provide students with additional opportunities to enhance learning and practice through special lectures, tailored clinical and research experiences and sponsored mentored projects. The Rural Track was the first track in the School of Medicine.

This pioneering track has become an important component of the CU School of Medicine’s diversity plan, which includes rural origin as a criterion for designation as being underrepresented in the student body and as a priority for recruitment and scholarship awards.

Expectations are Key

“One of the things that takes a lot of effort is the process we go through to find the right people. There is plenty of data that shows it isn’t only debt or income level that indicates which career path a medical student will choose: it is what their expectations are. First-generation college students and others who are otherwise underrepresented in medicine have expectations and motivation that can make them a perfect match for the Rural Track.”

Mark Deutchman, MD, Professor, School of Medicine, Rural Track Director

The Rural Track is Special

“The Rural Track gives students who are interested in considering careers in rural areas the opportunity to be supported and mentored through those choices. It was the first track the School of Medicine offered and it has been influential in the creation of other tracks along with increasing diversity in the school.”

Maureen Garrity, PhD, Associate Dean, School of Medicine

Rural Track Helps Student Return to Her Roots

When Laura Holder was a CU medical student, the Rural Track helped her return to her roots. She grew up in Crested Butte, population 1,500.

“I grew up seeing a model of care where the doctor who delivered me is the doctor who wrote my letter of recommendation for medical school,” Holder revealed. “You have to be ready for basically anything that walks through the door. That’s what interested me.”

Holder said the Rural Track’s social-support network was of particular value. “You’re surrounded by other students who have the same interests as you do, and people like Dr. Deutchman who have resources available to you,” she continued. She received a scholarship from the hospital foundation in Gunnison and will return there to practice once she completes her Family Medicine residency.
Changing Students’ Lives, Helping Rural Coloradans

Born and raised in La Junta, Colorado, D.J. Dutton understands what it’s like to live in a small town. A graduate of the School of Medicine class of 2011, he’ll move to a community just about an hour away from his hometown when he finishes his Family Medicine residency. “I am not all that interested in anonymity,” he says. “I grew up in a town where everyone knew everyone and it worked out fine.”

Dutton chose the CU School of Medicine in large part because of its Rural Track. “I applied for the Rural Track right off the bat,” he reveals.

As part of the program, students meet monthly with the other Rural Track students. They do rural-based training outside of class and rural doctors come to campus for special talks with students. He said those visits kept him and his peers excited about rural medicine. Although only a small proportion of medical students go into primary care, the Rural Track is changing that. “Our class had a lot of people headed into primary care compared to previous classes,” he acknowledges.

One incentive that sealed the deal for Dutton was a scholarship from the Spanish Peaks Healthcare Foundation in Walsenburg, Colorado. The Foundation provided a scholarship of $20,000 to Dutton, and in return, he has agreed to practice medicine at Spanish Peaks Hospital when he completes his residency.

Dutton says that the reasons people give for not wanting to practice in a small town are the very reasons that inspire him to want to practice rural medicine: everyone knows everyone; you cannot help but be a part of the community; and people talk about you as a result of them knowing your work.

“My grandparents were ranchers outside of La Junta. Absolutely everybody knows my grandpa,” he says. “When you’re a kid you don’t understand it, but when you are older you understand the importance of being such a strong part of a community.”

He and his fiancée look forward to settling down in Walsenburg. She plans to work as a lab tech in the same hospital where Dutton will practice as a physician. And perhaps best of all for Dutton, “I’ll be able to see the stars when I walk out on my porch,” he says. “I want that because I grew up that way.”

The Compound Benefits of Good Health Care

“Health care benefits individuals and communities. But it also provides jobs, which attract people to move into rural areas. For example, people choose to retire to the Plateau Valley because it has great health care. So health care ends up enriching the entire economy. Any way that small towns could contribute to the Rural Track would in the long run benefit them.”

Scott Rollins, MD, family physician and preceptor in the Rural Track, with medical student Bethany Morris
Support the Rural Track

Financial support from organizations like the Colorado Trust, the Colorado Health Foundation, the Caring for Colorado Foundation, the Kaiser Permanente Foundation, the Anschutz Family Foundation and CU School of Medicine Dean’s Office was critically important in developing the Rural Track. However, we now look to insightful and generous individuals to help build the Rural Track endowment to sustain this program for the long term.

Invest in the Rural Track

You are an essential part of the Rural Track at the CU School of Medicine. Your financial contribution and donations from alumni, individual families and communities are critically important in making a difference in rural Colorado. There are a number of ways you can help ensure that the Rural Track has a lasting impact:

1) Invest in an Endowment

The best way to ensure the Rural Track continues to educate future students and meet the needs of our rural areas across the state is through the establishment of an endowment. State funds account for less than two percent of the School of Medicine’s total funding. In recent years, Colorado has dropped to the bottom of all states in per capita spending on medical education.

An endowment for the Rural Track would ensure that future physicians graduate from the School of Medicine with the promise of making health care accessible to all Coloradans. Access to primary-care physicians is particularly acute in Colorado counties that are federally designated as primary health care shortage areas. An endowment would ensure a sustained, healthy operation of the Rural Track and at the same time equip the School of Medicine with adequate resources to attract a diverse student population that would otherwise not be able to receive medical training.

To demonstrate this commitment, the Department of Family Medicine has allocated a significant portion of a private grant to seed a Rural Track endowment. To learn more about the endowment and how you can support it, please contact the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus at 303.724.8227 or anschutzdevelopment@ucdenver.edu.
2) Invest in Scholarships

Scholarships are central to our efforts to recruit and support students participating in the Rural Track. Scholarship support can take different forms: general scholarships to support all the students in the Rural Track; targeted scholarships designated toward students from a particular geographic area or with a particular interest of study; or home-grown scholarships. The National Western Stock Show supports a targeted scholarship for students committed to future rural practice. The partnerships we have with hospitals in Gunnison, Montrose and Walsenburg exemplify home-grown scholarships. The scholarship amount that is most likely to make a difference for students starts at $10,000 per year, for three to four years of their medical education.

We look to individuals like you who understand that a strategic investment will have a ripple effect in improving the health of vulnerable citizens in rural Colorado and educating the next generation of top-notch physicians.

Make a gift today.

Contact the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus for additional scholarship information at 303.724.8227 or anschutzdevelopment@ucdenver.edu.

The Power of Giving

“Supporting our students with scholarships gives them the freedom to choose careers in rural medicine. Your contribution will make a difference in the lives of our students and the communities we serve.”

Richard D. Krugman, MD, Dean, School of Medicine
Donors Make a Difference: Todd Oberheu and the Spanish Peaks Hospital

Located three hours south of Denver and just three miles west of Walsenburg is Spanish Peaks Regional Health Center. The Health Center includes a 20-bed hospital, veterans’ home and several outreach and family clinics.

The beautiful location of this hospital with the spectacular Spanish Peaks as the backdrop masks the dire need of nurses, nurse practitioners and primary-care physicians in many communities in southern Colorado.

Several years ago, the Spanish Peaks Hospital Foundation came up with a creative way to attract the care providers they needed. The doctors at Spanish Peaks were so impressed with the Rural Track students they had met during their rotations, they decided to offer two scholarships of $20,000 each. In return, the students agreed to practice medicine at Spanish Peaks once they completed their residencies. The two students the foundation supports are D.J. Dutton, who is completing residency in family medicine at St. Joseph’s Hospital in Denver, and Hollie Vigil, who is a new graduate of the School of Medicine.

“The goal of the scholarship is to ensure we have solid primary care physician services for our community,” says Todd Oberheu, CEO of the hospital and member of the Spanish Peaks Healthcare Foundation board. “I would much rather go out and find a medical student who has a commitment or connection to our community than roll the dice with a recruitment firm.”

A businessman who cares deeply about his rural community, Oberheu says the scholarships were “no brainers”.

“I realized that a lot of times, the physicians we would get through recruiters tended to not put down roots,” laments Oberheu. “If we can get them into the community at a young age and get them ingrained into the community, I think they will stay.”

He likes the Rural Track because it produces physicians who already know what it’s like to be in a rural community. “They understand the benefits and the hardships,” Oberheu affirms. “That is why the Rural Track program is so important for the state.”