

Executive Summary

Monitoring the Progress of North Carolina Graduates Entering Primary Care Careers

November 2005

Background and Introduction

During its 1993 session, the North Carolina General Assembly expressed its interest in expanding the pool of generalist physicians for the state. In Senate Bill 27, as amended by House Bill 729, the General Assembly required that each of the state's four schools of medicine develop a plan with the goal to expand the percentage of medical school graduates choosing residency positions in primary care. Primary care was defined as family practice, internal medicine, pediatrics, and obstetrics-gynecology. The legislation set a goal of 60 percent for East Carolina University (ECU) and UNC School of Medicine graduates entering primary care, and 50 percent for Wake Forest and Duke.

In the 1995 session, the General Assembly expanded its earlier legislation and required the UNC Board of Governors to monitor the progress of the UNC system health professional schools toward increasing the number and proportion of nurse practitioner, physician assistant, and certified nurse midwife graduates entering primary care. This report is prepared in accordance with those statutes.

The Entry of Medical School Graduates into Careers in Primary Care

The North Carolina AHEC Program was charged by the General Assembly with tracking both the initial choice of residency of graduates, as well as the percentage of graduates remaining in primary care five years after graduation. Table I-1 shows that, for all four schools, 219, or 54 percent, of the 404 graduates in 1999 remained in primary care as of 2004. Table I-2 shows comparable data for the students at Duke and Wake Forest Schools of Medicine who are state-supported North Carolina students.

The schools also report on choice of residency for their most recent graduates. In 2005, 208 of the 407 total graduates of the four schools of medicine, or 51 percent entered primary care residency training. The Brody School of Medicine at ECU, at 77 percent, reached the target levels established by the General Assembly.

Both for new graduates and for those five years out of medical school, the percentage entering primary care from the four schools in North Carolina increased during the mid-1990s, but has declined slightly in recent years. Although the four schools continue to offer a variety of curricular and community experiences to interest students in a primary care career there is a strong national trend away from primary care that is also influencing the specialty choice of medical students in North Carolina.

Choice of Primary Care Career for Nurse Practitioner, Certified Nurse Midwife, and Physician Assistant Students

In accordance with the requirements of the 1995 Legislation, this report also tracks students in nurse practitioner, certified nurse midwife, and physician assistant programs five years after graduation in terms of their entry into primary care careers. Although the numbers of students in nurse practitioner programs were small in 1999, 62 percent remain in primary care as of 2004.

Since 1999, the number of students in nurse practitioner programs in the UNC system has risen dramatically. Table II-2 shows the graduates of these programs who have entered primary care practice during the past two years. Not only has this growth of students enrolled and the number of graduates increased significantly, the percentage of those graduates choosing careers in primary care has remained high, at 81 percent and 69 percent, respectively, for the past two years.

The certified nurse midwifery program and the physician assistant program at East Carolina University have shown similar growth in enrollments over the last five years. In addition, a high percentage of graduates of these programs enter primary care practice. For the most recent year, 100 percent of the certified nurse midwifery graduates entered primary care practice, and 59 percent of the physician assistant graduates chose primary care practice.

Conclusion

North Carolina has had a long standing commitment to expanding access to primary care services for its citizens. Because of the efforts of the four schools of medicine, and the health science schools, the North Carolina AHEC Program, the North Carolina Office of Rural Health, and related programs, North Carolina's rural counties continue to have a higher supply of physicians per population than comparable rural counties elsewhere in the country. In spite of this success historically, there are growing signs of an increasing shortage of primary care providers, particularly in rural and economically distressed counties. The dramatic growth in graduates of nurse practitioner, physician assistant, and certified nurse midwifery programs in the state may serve to alleviate these concerns.