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The Doctors Are In

Kaiser, Drexel team up to give med students a taste of hospital life

By Sena Christian

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Avir Mitra arrived dazed and confused: Here he was in a real surgery department, inside a major hospital, in the “Golden State” of California.

He was one of 16 students who had come from Philadelphia as third-year medical students at Drexel University’s College of Medicine to begin a six-month or year of clinical rotations at four Kaiser Permanente medical centers in Roseville, Sacramento and Vallejo.

These students headed out west in early July to pioneer a partnership between Drexel and Kaiser to expose the pupils to Kaiser’s model of integrated health care and develop the next generation of physician leaders.

The program’s launch comes at a critical time as the industry faces changes associated with the implementation of the Affordable Care Act, technological advancements, rising costs of chronic diseases and different outlooks on how to best care for patients. Some in the profession also warn of an upcoming physician shortage as more people get insured and baby boomers age — others argue this problem is rather one of waste and inefficiency.

“It’s a weird time to be a medical student because health care is changing so drastically right now,” said Mitra, 32. “Who knows how it’s going to be in a few years.”

He said Kaiser is an ideal place to be as a student because of its reputation as forward-thinking.

Over the course of the next six months, Mitra and his peers will do rotations in pediatrics, obstetrics/gynecology, surgery, outpatient psychiatry, family medicine and adult medicine — and get valuable on-the-job training that addresses the essential aspects of care that don’t necessarily get covered in a textbook or classroom.

The third year of medical school represents that giant leap from theory to practice, according to Kaiser Roseville surgeon Dr. Thomas Dugoni.

“This is the transition from ‘this is the book’ to ‘this is the patient,’” Dugoni said.

Thrown into the fire

Mitra, a Philadelphia native, was introduced to Northern California the way many visitors are — with a trip to In-N-Out Burger. Fellow student Adam Lindsay, 26, joked that’s part of the duties of the state’s official welcoming committee.

The Drexel medical students have become friends and often hang out on the weekends, but mainly their stay in California involves much work and little play. They typically show up for their shift at Kaiser at 6 a.m. and work until 6 p.m. Other days, they’re on 24-hour call. They’re thrown into the fire, seeing firsthand what it’s like to be a physician.

Pre-med students at Sacramento’s Drexel campus have already had opportunities to observe Kaiser Permanente’s model of care through a 10-month physician shadowing program started in 2011. The school’s Interdepartmental Medical Science program is one of only a few in the United States, according to a press

release announcing its launch. This is the first time the program has been offered for medical students outside Philadelphia.

Dr. Diane Chan, who works in the pediatrics department in Roseville, said Kaiser is a largely unknown health care system on the East Coast, so it's important that future physicians get to experience this model — and report back.

The Kaiser model is big on integrated care, which aims to move a patient (and his medical records) seamlessly from the clinic to the hospital, or from primary care to specialty care. Nationwide, the industry is seeing a move toward a team-based approach to patient care.

The students shadow doctors, learning nuances of how to interact with patients. Chan said she and colleague Dugoni, who both serve as mentors, often comment to each other on how they wished they'd learned while in medical school how, for instance, to handle a patient who is giving the doctor trouble about his medication.

Additionally, students learn ethics of medicine in the context of real-world issues.

"That builds leadership to let them know there's a responsibility for what you do as a physician," Dugoni said.

These students also have an opportunity to develop an interest in a specific branch of medicine, making them better prepared for their residency, which is required to practice medicine in the United States and occurs after they have obtained a medical degree.

'I could do this'

Under Dugoni's supervision, Mitra recently took out his first appendix, and sewed the patient back up. He will have the opportunity to do all sorts of surgery during his six-week rotation in the department.

Mitra attributes Kaiser's electronic medical records system and other efficiencies with allowing medical students more time to assist with operations.

"I'll scrub in on seven cases and my friends at home are lucky to scrub in on one a day," he said.

The first two years of medical school are all about reading textbooks, lectures and labs in the classroom. The third year is when the education changes. Mitra says he could feel himself learning when he assisted on 10 outpatient cases during one shift, and handled the camera device that looks inside the body, producing images on a screen for the doctor.

"I felt like I could do this," Mitra said.

His colleague Lindsay agrees, explaining how only three weeks into the program his perspective on health care has broadened, while giving him more insight into the reality of being a doctor.

"You're one-on-one with an expert. There's no better way to do it," said Lindsay, who grew up near Placerville and plans to do his residency in California.

Lindsay recently had the opportunity to handle the "close" of a surgery under the guidance of Dugoni.

"When you're attending hands you a needle and thread and says, 'Practice this and I'm going to watch you try this,' that is a big moment," Lindsay said. "If nothing else, it's inspires confidence."