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From left, Dr. Eugene Chin, Dr. Kristin Newton, Dr. John Charde and Dr. John Gallup discussed their experiences with working, building a life and retiring in a rural community, during a panel discussion on the Foundation for Community Health's immersion program on Wednesday evening, July 26. *Photo by Kaitlin Lyle*

Sharon, Conn. — Seven medical students were in the Tri-state region last month for a two-week immersion program through the Foundation for Community Health.

Director of Communications and Special Programs Gertrude O'Sullivan explained, "It is known in the field that we lack primary care physicians in the area and there are federal programs that attract and retain students. It's very evolved and the reality is that it's difficult to attract programs to us."

She spoke to a few enthusiastic local stakeholders who were interested in creating a similar program; the group reached out to the health care facilities in the area as well as three medical schools. O'Sullivan also mentioned that many of the stakeholders are now members of the program's planning committee, including HRHCare (Hudson River Healthcare), Columbia Hudson Area Health Education Center, Sharon Hospital, Geer Nursing and Rehabilitation, Touro College in New York City, Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Conn., and UConn.

While other program models require a budget, part of what makes the immersion program unusual is that it operates through community collaboration without a budget and the facilities that host the students factor in costs as in-kind services.

As the students rotate through the varying healthcare facilities, O'Sullivan said, they are exposed to the community. Such efforts include Indian Mountain School donating housing, Sharon Playhouse and The Moviehouse donating tickets and The Woodland and the Black Rabbit restaurants in Lakeville, Conn., donating gift certificates.

"Our hopes are that when they finish their education, they will consider coming back and practicing in the community," O'Sullivan said, which would increase practitioner access and available services in the area.

In its second year, the program gathered a total of seven rising second-year medical students, including Saran Patel, Mouhammed Shilleh, Shubhdeep Ahden, Carly Rice and Aeree Lee from Touro College and David Turco and Sagar Desai from Quinnipiac University. The two-week program ran between July 13 and July 29 with the students rotating three days each at the medical facilities.

Their hard work was recognized during a dinner hosted at Foundation for Community Health offices in Sharon on Wednesday, July 26.

Before they were officially welcomed to the dinner by O'Sullivan, the students and members of the planning committee had a chance to mingle and ask one another questions about the medical field. Following a concise summary of the program's initiation and its progress, O'Sullivan had those present introduce themselves and share their impressions of rural medicine.

The students praised the program, expressed gratitude for their experience and thanked the planning committee for providing such a remarkable educational opportunity.

"This has been an amazing experience," Desai praised, "truly my first exposure to this kind of environment, and I'm kind of amazed by how much I enjoyed being here."

In turn, the students were complimented for devoting two weeks of their summer to participating in the program.

Then, O'Sullivan turned the discussion over to the four panelists.

One by one, each panelist spoke about their experience practicing medicine in a rural community, building a life here and retiring here. All four doctors had worked in more metropolitan areas, but they agreed on practicing in a rural community has its perks.

"I think some of the pearls, the pluses, of working in a small community is you get to know your colleagues," said Dr. Eugene Chin, an associate medical director at Fairview Hospital in Great Barrington, Mass.

As a family doctor practicing at Regional Healthcare Associates in Kent, Conn., Dr. Kristin Newton advocated the idea of primary care as an area of need and meaningful gratification, especially in a rural setting. She also stressed the importance of building relationships between practitioners and patients.

"I think one of the main things about primary care is you develop a relationship with your patients," Newton said. "I think one of the joys of working in an area like this is that people really appreciate their doctor. When you're in an area like this, you really are an access point for patients."

Plus, as primary care doctors, she said, they have their pick of anywhere in the country to practice.

"One thing that I have found now that I'm not practicing," retired pediatrician John Charde said, "is that I'm starting to see that there are all sorts of things around here that can be done and need to be done.

"Opportunities are starting to change radically," Charde said. "For you, the opportunities that have been here are even greater."

Similar to Newton, retired pediatrician Dr. John Gallup affirmed the importance of getting to know the patients and being available to them. Reflecting on his own journey in the medical field, he also said it's important for the students not to separate themselves from what matters most as they progress in their careers.

When the panel opened for questions from the audience, Turco asked the panelists what the greatest disadvantage of working in a rural area was.

"I think professionally, at least for me, one of the challenges of working in an area like this is that people who need special care or critically ill patients need to go somewhere else," Dr. Chin replied.

Dr. Charde answered that establishing relationships with the university specialists sometimes posed a challenge and Dr. Gallup admitted that adapting to the changes in research, practice and medicine could be a problem at times.

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