

Eisenhower Residency Program Aims To Keep New Doctors

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By: Victoria Pelham, report for The Desert Sun

Kenneth Yu has picked up his white coat and spent the past couple of weeks making rounds in Eisenhower Medical Center's Intensive Care Unit, visiting patients at their bedside, performing exams, reviewing lab results, and working with a team of doctors to tailor treatment plans for patients.

It's a new level of responsibility and independence, the new preliminary medicine resident said.

And, it's also a new experience for the doctors and second-year trainees as the three-year program grows and adjusts. Eisenhower's second class of 22 medical residents began their training at the hospital in late June, growing the program to 38 total residents.

"Each step is progress towards meeting the needs for more primary care physicians in the Coachella Valley," said Dr. Maureen Strohm, director of the family medicine residency program.

The Valley is medically underserved with some areas falling far short of federal recommendations for one doctor per 2,000 residents. For years, health care leaders have pushed for solutions such as new medical training programs that would offer care for patients during residency, but also lead to doctors staying in the area in the long term. Studies have shown that doctors tend to practice where they finish their education.

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The UC Riverside School of Medicine recently opened a facility for its first class of residents that will bring eight people to the Coachella Valley by July 2015.

Eisenhower's program, launched last summer, is made up of tracks in family medicine, internal medicine and one-year preliminary medicine. They will complete a variety of rotations depending on their track — surgery, cardiology, obstetrics at the 29 Palms naval hospital, pediatrics, community medicine, emergency medicine, inpatient adult medicine and others.

And, they will have a chance to explore areas they might like to practice in.



Eisenhower residents, from left, Alberto Torres, Kenneth Yu and Nathan Abraham speak with Pulmonologist Dr. Shahriyar Tavakoli at Eisenhower Medical Center on Thursday. (Photo: Jay Calderon/The Desert Sun)

Yu, who completed a combined medical degree at USC and Ph.D. in molecular immunology from CalTech, will go on to specialize in dermatology after his first residency. His interest in people — coupled with a passion for research — led him to medicine, but he's focused on innovation. While a graduate student, he was heavily involved in development of an HIV vaccine that has now gone to clinical trial and worked with a medical mission group in Swaziland, hard-hit by the AIDS epidemic.

Now the 33-year-old is working on a pilot study about the effects of HIV on aging people as they live longer with the infection, with a special focus on how it affects skin conditions, sun exposure and cancers. The Valley has high HIV prevalence rates, and the average age of Eisenhower's patients is 70 years old.

"I'm a bit of an entrepreneur myself; I like to be on the forefront of things," he said. "Here the program is extremely responsive to residents.

"I feel like we are helping to build the program together ... like we're not just trainees, I feel like we're partners."

That same drive to help build the residency brought many of the hospital's second class of residents to the desert.

"Being a newer program and being a residency that just started, I feel like we can have more impact and shape it toward the future in a way you can't with a program that has been established," said Matthew Keating, a first-year internal medicine resident.

Keating, currently working out of the hospital's inpatient wards, has lived in Southern California his entire life and is a USC graduate. He grew up visiting his grandmother in Rancho Mirage every year who, along with several other relatives, was treated at the same hospital where he's now a resident.

He said he would like to give back to a community that always gave to him growing up and to have the same connection with the area as his grandmother did.

"I feel like it's starting to happen little by little, but I have a long way to go," he said.

If he were offered an opportunity to stay in the area, Keating said he'd strongly consider it.

Some of the first residency class have already bought homes with the intention of staying to practice.

Strohm said they'd like to "be part of the solution and not part of the problem." The program has begun to focus more on community activities to give residents a picture of the area's diversity and opportunities for practice after residency.

Second-year residents are working on community-based projects such as working with the Volunteers in Medicine clinic and Mountain View Estates in Thermal for diabetes

screening and management.

Gloria Graham, a family medicine resident and graduate of the American University of the Caribbean, has already spoken with the residents about possibly getting involved in clinics serving the underserved and underprivileged, a group she's drawn to in part because of her own background, she said.

"We do have some of the richest people, but we also have some of the poorest people in the world surrounding this area," she said.

Originally from Mexico, she grew up in Los Angeles and found a love for medicine through volunteering at hospitals and clinics including one in Puebla, Mexico, right after medical school graduation.

Graham finds the Valley calm and relaxing — a place where, pregnant with her first child, she can see herself raising her child after the program is done.

She would like to practice preventive health care and diabetes management and women's health care and believes her fluency in Spanish, and knowledge and experience of the culture, will allow her to connect deeper with the area's large Latino population while a resident.

Mahvand Sedaghi, an internal medicine resident and graduate of Ross University, previously studied political science, global health and the study of aging. She sees relevance in all of her earlier degrees as a medical resident at Eisenhower: different health conditions from around the country and world because of snowbirds and well-traveled residents, an older average age of patients in the Valley, the connection between health insurance and doctors because "medicine has been pushed into the realm of politics."

And she likes the broad range of patients she gets to see at Eisenhower and its clinics — from the well-heeled and well-served to the patients without insurance that the residents often treat.

"There's certainly a need in the valley, and hopefully many of us will fill that need," Sedaghi said.

In just the first couple weeks of training, she said she'd seen 30 to 40 patients.

Strohm said all of the program's first class of residents had exceeded graduate medical education goals, with each seeing 200 patients in their first year. They are now looking to reach out to young families.

Combined with faculty, the program is expected to bring in about 30,000-50,000 additional patients when it's complete.

"Each year, I think is going to be getting stronger as word gets out about who we are and

what we're doing," Strohm said.

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-Residencies started in 2013.

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