



State University of New York

Upstate Medical University

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Plan to Attract Doctors to Rural Areas Worth Pursuing

Recently, the governor announced "Doctor's Across New York" a plan to attract physicians to underserved rural and urban communities by helping to pay for some of their student loans. This exciting idea would provide incentive to new doctors as they determine where to pursue their residency and, ultimately, to practice.

The decision to become a rural physician is one that must start early. It requires a combination of support: personal, from parents, teachers and the community; programming, to provide the right paths for education and access; and policy, such as the program the governor proposes as well as better reimbursement for doctors who dedicate themselves to underserved communities.

At SUNY Upstate, we cultivate students to make such a choice. Our Rural Medical Education Program (RMED), which places medical students in a small community for nine months, is the second-oldest such program in the country. Graduates from our program make a difference in rural health care.

For example, Dr. Russell Rider (Class of 1986) is the only physician in the Adirondack's Hamilton County and has also raised funds for a medical center there.

We also must continue to create educational pathways for promising students. Dr. Darah Wright (Class of 2006) was one of the first to follow a guaranteed admissions program from her hometown community college in Cobleskill, to Binghamton University, to SUNY Upstate where she later won a merit scholarship. She served as an RMED student in Potsdam and plans to be a family doctor.

In January, our campus pledged \$250,000 to double student enrollment in RMED and to launch another program Rural Medical Scholars which will begin admitting its first students this fall. The Rural Medical Scholars Program will partner with regional communities, colleges and pipeline programs through the state's Area Health Education Centers to identify, recruit and admit students who have a sincere interest in one day practicing in a small New York community.

Medical universities cannot take an "if we build it, they will come" approach to education. Consider the success of the Cooperative Extension model practiced by land grant universities that revitalized agriculture; we plan to take the same approach to medical education and will align our educational offerings to the needs of New York state.

It only takes one doctor to make a huge difference for a community. We will continue to build this access with medical graduates, along with graduates from our nursing and health professional programs. For the state to make it easier for new graduates to serve where they are needed most is an excellent step.

— David R. Smith