

### **Public Health and Physician Assistant Training**

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The goals of the linkage support the mission statements of each institution. The YCCHD mission states: "to provide public health services through leadership, education, prevention and direct services in collaboration with our community partners." Complimenting the health department, the Rocky Mountain College PA program seeks to "provide quality medical education which integrates academic training and clinical experience... to produce well prepared graduates who have a commitment to medical service, particularly to those in under-served areas of this region". With this collaboration, students are acculturated to the public health philosophy of providing care for underserved populations while monitoring, diagnosing, investigating, educating, and evaluating health concerns affecting populations. New generations of primary care providers are being trained to practice medicine on both the individual patient and the population level through this evolving partnership.

The partnership has been in existence and growing since 1995 when the RMC Physician Assistant program began. However, since 2002 the partnership has begun to blossom and to become more committed. Across two and a half years, RMC PA directors worked over 300 hours in various health department clinics--service was mostly provided in the "Healthcare for the Homeless" clinics. Forty-four students have spent time in public health clinics during their second-year clinical rotations. In just the last three years, five different PA graduates have been employed at the Deering Clinic following graduation --"workforce development" in action. This fall, 57 class periods were facilitated by YCCHD preventative health staff. In the spring of 2004, the 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Practical Use of Psychiatric Medications will be held. This conference has grown from 50 attendees to an average of 130 participants in the last four years. Significant benefit has been reaped in the attendees earning from 6-10 continuing education units (profession specific). The conference is the brainchild of a clinic PharmD and the first Director of the RMC PA program.

The latest change in the partnership has the greatest potential to affect the public health training of primary care physician assistants. Together, YCCHD and RMC PA leaders have shaped a newly begun Masters program that requires more public health education than the former bachelors' program, including the newly prominent field of bioterrorism. Mr. Roth and his colleagues have become stakeholders whose expertise is being actively solicited to refine the public health portion of the curriculum.

The major obstacle or challenge faced by the RMC/YCCHD partnership is the financial constraint of the reimbursement for teaching. Since 1995, RMC paid their adjunct professors the nominal fee of \$35 per lecture hour. At such a low reimbursement, the college is in a position of essentially asking for continued volunteer support. The CEO of the health department decided in the fall of 2003 that investing time and effort by three public health employees into teaching the masters' curriculum was important toward producing physician assistants who had a more comprehensive view of population health. Thus while Mr. Roth and two colleagues spent the equivalent of a .8 FTE position in the fall of 2003 preparing and presenting course material, the

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health department will only be reimbursed for \$1,890. For a short time this reimbursement problem can be tolerated, but a long-term solution needs to be found. The RMC/YCCHD partnership is actively pursuing alternative funding through educational grant opportunities to allow for substantial time to be spent in faculty development for the YCCHD professionals so that the public health curriculum can be enhanced and focused on the three core functions and 10 essential services of public health. This curricular change advocated by the YCCHD employees and supported by RMC will better prepare PAs for their often isolated employment situations in health professional shortage areas in rural communities and will allow them to function as a "one-person health department" when necessary.

It is the shared goal of meeting public health and health care needs through service and education that ultimately ties the Yellowstone City-County Health Department and the Rocky Mountain College Physician Assistant Program together.