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Anger is a side effect of University of North Texas doctor plan

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Texas needs more doctors, and the University of North Texas medical school in Fort Worth stands ready to help.

But first, Tarrant County's most prominent professional school will have to heal a bellyache — and medicate the wounded feelings of its current doctors.

Dr. Scott Ransom, the ambitious president of the health science center, announced this week what had been whispered for some time: The school will discuss whether to offer an allopathic medical degree, an M.D., alongside the current osteopathic degree, a D.O.

Texas osteopaths responded with a sharp scalpel.

The Texas Osteopathic Medical Association "opposes the granting of an M.D. degree," according to a motion last weekend. It also wants to look into the "osteopathic integrity" of the school.

Ransom's original e-mail said that to grow, the school should "review the most optimal way to support our mission . . . while maintaining financial stability."

In other words, if there are research dollars out there going to other schools and if Texas is going to invest state money in new schools for M.D.s, maybe there's a way to offer both degrees and bring those dollars to Fort Worth.

After all, the difference is basically the print on the diploma.

Or at least that's what we've said in Fort Worth for 40 years, ever since doctors turned an old bowling alley at Camp Bowie Boulevard and Montgomery Street into the Texas College of Osteopathic Medicine.

But mixing M.D.s with D.O.s is like telling dogs to bunk with cats.

The two disciplines respect each other, yet suspect each other.

Sam Tessen, the executive director of the state osteopathic association, said his doctors fret about losing space and resources in their premier medical school, not to mention the school's legacy.

Tessen said osteopaths fear "a big fight."

"We don't see what another degree adds," he said. "It's already a top-notch medical school, and it has become a national leader in producing primary-care doctors. Now there's confusion and uncertainty among students about the commitment to osteopathy."

Ransom's e-mail emphasized "preserving and improving" osteopathic education but said the school wants to add "any new degree option" that won't require much more money.

Tarrant County Hospital Board Chairman Steve Montgomery of Fort Worth, a computer software executive, said he will be among those on a community panel reviewing the idea.

"I'm excited," he said Thursday. "It's great for the community. It gets past the tension between the M.D.s and the D.O.s. We're missing out on a lot of opportunities to attract research dollars to the school, the North Texas region and here to JPS," referring to the public John Peter Smith Hospital.

Dan Petty, president of the Irving-based North Texas Commission business group and an advocate for upgrading area public universities into a Tier 1 research center, warmed to the idea.

"We are really proud of that school in Fort Worth," he said. "Both universities would have to collaborate. But we want to bring more research everywhere."

State Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas, is UNT's best friend in Austin. He said selling the dual degree would be an "uphill battle," one that should wait until 2011.

Or until the pain subsides.

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