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University of North Texas Health Science Center's proposal for M.D. program stirs debate

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The University of North Texas Health Science Center could begin offering M.D. degrees within a few years if school officials approve a proposal to add that program to its osteopathic medicine curriculum.

Science center President Scott Ransom notified students, employees and alumni this week that the Fort Worth medical school is considering creating the M.D. program.

He is assembling a "study group" of community leaders to evaluate the school's options and to make a recommendation to the university system's board of regents by May.

The science center's 38-year-old Texas College of Osteopathic Medicine now offers a D.O. degree. Most graduates go on to practice primary medical care, such as general internal medicine and pediatrics.

"We're really considering adding an M.D. option. But one thing must be very, very clear: This is in addition to the Texas College of Osteopathic Medicine," Ransom said Thursday. "We believe we can enhance that D.O. program, improve the quality, improve the opportunities for students."

Osteopathic doctors and allopathic physicians, known as M.D.s, are both licensed to prescribe drugs, perform surgeries and practice the full scope of medicine.

But osteopathic medicine, which dates to the 1870s, also emphasizes a "whole person" approach to care. And D.O.s are trained in manipulative treatments, relying on their hands to diagnose illness and encourage good health.

While the university's committee is months from a formal recommendation, the M.D. idea already has some osteopathic physicians fuming.

Leaders of the Texas Osteopathic Medical Association voted unanimously last weekend to oppose the plan.

"We simply don't understand why there's even talk about an M.D. program at that school, when what Fort Worth already has is just top of the pile," said Sam Tessen, the association's executive director. "There's an implication in there that somehow the osteopathic program is not equal. The osteopathic program in Fort Worth is not only equal to but better than a number of other medical school programs across the country."

Ransom said adding an M.D. degree could help ensure that students have adequate opportunities to get training in clinical settings.

Medical students typically spend their third and fourth years getting hands-on education at hospitals and other facilities. Traditionally, many of the Fort Worth college's students received that training at the adjacent Osteopathic Medical Center of Texas. But that hospital closed in October 2004.

Although other hospitals have filled the void, Ransom said it's becoming "a greater challenge" to find enough spots for students to train.

"It was so wonderful to have the osteopathic hospital right next door," he said. "That just isn't there anymore."

Ample access to training sites could become increasingly important, Ransom said, as the science center pushes to reach aggressive enrollment goals. The school wants to grow from its current 175 incoming students each year to classes of 250.

Adding an M.D. program would cost almost nothing extra because the science center would rely on its current faculty and use buildings that exist or are already in the works, Ransom said. Still, the center would need to take steps to seek credentials from the Liaison Committee on Medical Education, which accredits allopathic medicine programs.

"Realistically, we're talking a minimum of seven to upwards of 10 years before we would have the first M.D. physician graduate," Ransom said.

The UNT System's board of regents will have the final decision on the program. The board, appointed by the governor, oversees the University of North Texas, the University of North Texas Health Science Center at Fort Worth and the UNT Dallas campus.

Ransom said both the D.O. and M.D. programs would continue to emphasize primary-care medicine.

That's important, because healthcare providers and educators have for years predicted a nationwide shortage of doctors, especially primary-care physicians.

In an October report, the Association of American Medical Colleges projected that the shortage would reach 124,000 full-time physicians by 2025.

Dr. Steve Shannon, president of the American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine, said moves such as the science center's proposal could help address the problem.

"For a sound healthcare system, primary care is the buttress of that system," Shannon said. "If you just produce a bunch of specialists, it improves the access to specialty care. But it doesn't improve the overall health system."

Dr. Rex Hyer, president-elect of the Tarrant County Medical Society, said the science center's proposed interdisciplinary collaboration may have advantages.

"I don't care if they have a D.O. degree or an M.D. degree — we need more physicians," Hyer said. "In a time when we desperately need primary care, for there to be a discipline that promotes this is a very good thing."

Tessen said osteopathic and allopathic physicians now routinely work together in medical offices and hospitals nationwide. But many D.O.s can recall earlier decades of fighting for equality.

They worry that the osteopathic college could lose resources if its students must share a campus with M.D.s-in-training, he said.

"This issue has generated more reaction, more questions, more telephone calls, more e-mails than anything I've seen in four years with this association," Tessen said.

Osteopathic doctors' message to him: "Don't let this happen. Do whatever you can do to stop this from happening."

Correspondent Andrew Chavez contributed to this report.