



Preceptorships open up **The**
Real World of family medicine



Christina Doerr, MSIII
and her preceptor, Dr.
Carl Peters, see patients
during a Saturday clinic.



Written by Karen Carlson ● Photography by James Hawker

Christina Doerr, MSIII, sorts through a patient's chart outside the exam room. She's quite at ease, writing orders for the patient. If it wasn't for the shortness of her white coat, you would naturally and reasonably assume that she was the physician in charge.

Under the watchful eyes of their mentor physicians, medical students such as Doerr get a strong taste of what it's like to lead medical care thanks to the SIU Department of Family & Community Medicine (DFCM) Preceptorship Program, part of the family medicine clerkship that is required for third-year students.

Although students are exposed to patient care in the first and second year of medical school and also practice their skills with standardized patients, there's no substitute for the hands-on experience of the real world of medicine. And there's no better place to learn than at a busy family practice clinic.

"No matter what field they go into, students can learn so much about everything in family medicine," says Amber Barnhart, M.D., associate professor of family and community medicine. "The variety is incredible."

Preceptors play an invaluable role in the education of the medical students, providing an opportunity for students to practice their medical skills in an office setting in rural

or urban areas, notes DFCM Instructor Julie Robbs, M.A., coordinator of predoctoral education. More than 160 board-certified family physicians volunteer their time. The program has broadened the School of Medicine's campus far beyond Carbondale and Springfield, to East St. Louis, Normal, Decatur, Litchfield, Carlinville, Rockford, Marion and 80 other Illinois communities, creating a live, interactive and mutually beneficial network of professionals serving as educators.

During a preceptorship, students see patients in clinics, attend hospital rounds, office meetings or conferences, even participate in night call and visit nursing home residents. Students looking for a broader experience can choose to do a preceptorship at one of the four DFCM residency programs in the state, where students work with different family practice physicians every day.

Exposing medical students to real patients is nothing new at SIU School of Medicine. From nearly the first week, students experience patient care by visiting mentor physicians once a week. But as their education progresses, medical students like Doerr are ready for more. "With mentors, we're shadowing the physician and just watching what they do," she says.

Instead of being a physician's shadow, the DFCM pre-



Doerr does a strep test for a 14-year-old patient. "The preceptorship definitely has built my self-confidence."

ceptorship program lets third-year students work side-by-side with community family physicians on the front lines of medicine, five or six days a week for six weeks. "The preceptorship program is our strength in family medicine education," notes Harald Lausen, M.D., family medicine clerkship director. "It gives students an opportunity to get out of Springfield in order to have a clinical experience in a community and really see what primary care is like outside of an academic center."

During her preceptorship, Doerr assisted Carl Peters, M.D., at OSF St. Joseph Medical Center in Normal, Ill. During a recent Saturday clinic, Doerr finished taking a history and physical on "Butch" who was having heart palpitations. Doerr diagnosed atrial fibrillation.

"During this preceptorship, I'm coming up with the treatment for all the patients," she says excitedly. "Dr. Peters pushes me to come up with a plan and a differential." Although she was somewhat overwhelmed at first, Doerr is feeling more like a physician with each patient she sees.

The hosting physician keeps a watchful eye on the students. Dr. Peters' teaching style is to keep Doerr intrigued, varying the kinds of patients she sees, and putting her to work researching the more unusual cases like Butch's or perspectives of common illness such as diabetes and hypertension. "Ninety percent of what walks in the door family physicians can treat," Dr. Peters notes. "The variety is remarkable."

In these real-life situations, education stretches beyond basic medical care. Doerr admires the rapport Dr. Peters has with his patients. Even though the Saturday clinic is near closing time, Dr. Peters spends a lot of time with Butch and his wife, patiently answering their questions. Butch's hands are clasped; he rubs his thumbs together nervously. His wife's pen is poised over a folded piece of paper. "How do you spell it?" she asks. "A-T-R-I-A-L-F-I-B-R-I-L-L-A-T-I-O-N." They talk for a minute about aviation, and joke about bringing a piece of Italian Crème Cake when Butch comes back on Monday for a follow-up.

Students can also learn about their preceptors' special interests, such as legal medicine, occupational medicine, sports medicine, procedural medicine, nursing home/geriatric medicine or women's health. Dr. Peters has an interest in the business aspects of medicine, including litigation and risk management.

"We can't escape the business side," Dr. Peters says. "In the real world, we have commitments to make: giving good medicine to the patient, reimbursement, and providing what's expected of an employer."

Doerr appreciates the information about learning how to manage a practice, which will be of great help to her in her career in OB/GYN. She also has enjoyed the continuity of care that primary care practice provides. "The preceptorship program definitely has built my self-confidence," she says.

Students eager for more patient experience can revisit their preceptors or choose a new preceptor as an elective during their fourth year of medical school. Surprisingly, some students who aren't planning on pursuing family medicine return to family medicine preceptors. For example, Jeffrey Klein, MSIV, is pursuing a career in diagnostic radiology. He chose to visit the fast-paced family practice of Dr. Michael Brewer as a fourth-year elective. Dr. Brewer is a physician with the Springfield Clinic. "As an intern I'll be responsible for the patients," Klein says. "Even those in nonclinical fields need to do clinical medicine in fourth year to get as much patient experience as they can." Nearly two-thirds of SIU senior students choose a second preceptorship.



Because he has seen more patients and more illnesses during his second experience in a clinic, Klein says he feels very comfortable in his role as a medical caregiver. “I like that I have more of a say in the care for patients. It’s important to experience the autonomy that the preceptorship program provides. I know I’ll be better prepared for residency.”

The preparation includes patient care beyond history and physicals to learning how to perform procedures. “We do endometrial biopsies, colposcopies, skin lump excision, cryotherapy of skin lesions to name a few,” Dr. Brewer says.

Along with learning the intricacies of the daily life of a family physician, medical students can discover what type of medicine best suits them. For example, Dr. Brewer’s mostly adult population has confirmed for Klein that he enjoys working with adults and the older population. During his third-year clerkship with Michael Wall, M.D., in Forsyth, Ill., Klein learned he was better suited to a career in radiology than a surgical subspecialty, an area he considered.

Klein also gained experience with an emerging technology in medicine: electronic medical records. “Every bit of information is at your fingertips,” he says. “You don’t have a thick chart to go through. It helps you know what needs to be done and what’s been done in the past. I’m glad Dr. Brewer has electronic records, too.”

Preceptorships show students the importance of community service. Dr. Brewer is active in the Springfield community with the United Cerebral Palsy and Bethesda, a group home for mentally challenged adults. Klein has met many of those patients in the clinic.

Dr. Brewer, an SIU School of Medicine faculty member from 1980-91, understands the importance of teaching. “Teaching was the part of the job I liked most at SIU, working one-on-one with students. I am happy to have the opportunity to do that as a preceptor.”

He sees benefits for his practice, too, with young medical minds adding fresh perspectives to his office. “The quality of students from SIU School of Medicine is very good,” Dr. Brewer says. “It’s nice being able to share

Dr. Peters and Doerr share a passion for the Air Force. Doerr is attending medical school on an Air Force scholarship, and Dr. Peters is an Air Force veteran.



Jeffrey Klein, MSIV, examines a patient at Dr. Brewer's clinic.

something with them, and we're able to learn from them."

In addition, preceptors retain a clinical faculty appointment at SIU and also have access to the School's library and electronic research databases such as InfoPOEMS®. In the past, continuing medical education courses also have been held for preceptors.

The network of the family medicine preceptorship is a great resource not just for preceptors and students, but for the entire School of Medicine system. The number of preceptors has jumped nearly 800 percent during the past 25 years. "Preceptors are a huge asset for the School," Dr. Lausen says. "They welcome our students with open arms and really enjoy teaching them. We greatly appreciate it."

The program is also helping to fulfill the School's mission of putting physicians in underserved communities. Litchfield — one of the original preceptorship sites — has recruited at least two former students to work in the area, Robbs says. "The students learn that in some small communities, family medicine manages all the medical care."

In the last few years, the administrators have sought sites serving Hispanic and African-American populations. Preceptors based in East St. Louis, Cahokia and similar

areas are adding diversity to the students' experiences. Robbs says she hopes to add more alumni to the preceptor list.

With passionate physician educators and eager students on the thresholds of their careers, the preceptorship program has become a thriving, interactive network of education.

"The preceptor program is very powerful," Dr. Barnhart says. "Students get to see what the real world of family medicine is like. It's powerful for preceptors who love having students keep them up to date. And it's powerful for communities who are getting medical students in the community. Students come back with great respect for the communities and the services provided." ●●●