

University of California Riverside, Palm Desert has healthy future

Written by K Kaufmann *The Desert Sun*

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UCR medical school's first class

UC Riverside's School of Medicine welcomed its inaugural class of 50 students at a "white coat" ceremony Aug. 9 in Riverside, but none of the new students receiving the white jackets were from the Coachella Valley. The school is focused on training students from the Inland Empire as primary care physicians to help fill critical shortages of general practice doctors in the region. Of the 2,400 applications the school received for its first class, nine came from the valley, said Dean G. Richard Olds. Three of those students were offered spots at the school but decided to go elsewhere, he said. The class does include one student from Yucca Valley. Women comprise 52 percent of the incoming class, and 44 percent come from disadvantaged backgrounds, Olds said. One problem in attracting local students is that the new school cannot offer many scholarships, said Olds, a gap he hopes to fill with future fundraising. He also pointed to programs such as Future Physician Leaders, a mentoring program started in 2009 by U.S. Rep. Raul Ruiz, D-Palm Desert, when he was an emergency room doctor at Eisenhower Medical Center. The program, aimed at building a pipeline of qualified local students for the medical school, started out with nine students; this summer it provided mentoring and research and community service opportunities to 149 students from the valley and the Riverside-San Bernardino area.

PALM DESERT — The University of California Riverside's Palm Desert campus has struggled to develop a self-sustaining identity almost since it opened its doors in 2005.

Various graduate business programs have come and gone; the school's master of fine arts program survived by jettisoning its onsite classes and shifting to a distance-learning model. But with the opening of UC Riverside's new School of Medicine, the Palm Desert campus looks to be finally building a presence as a center for health care programs and research.

The campus is now home to the Coachella Valley offices of the Clinton Foundation's Health Matters Initiative and the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, both involved in programs aimed at promoting healthier living in the region. The Health Assessment Resource Center (HARC), which conducts valleywide surveys on residents' health and access to health care, also recently moved its offices to the campus.

The UCR campus is also located next to California State University, San Bernardino's Palm Desert Campus, which has its own health sciences center and nursing programs.

In April, the Palm Desert City Council approved the transfer of 11.5 acres of land on the campus to UCR's medical school to be developed as a health center, with a community clinic, surgery center and geriatric activity center.

The UCR medical school will not be sending students to the valley for clinical training yet, said Dean G. Richard Olds, but it has started hiring research faculty who will be based in Riverside but may use the Palm Desert campus as a base for broad-based projects in the region.

“We have one person starting in September. The study she’s doing right now has to do with different parenting approaches across cultures. It’s unusual to get a physician with strength in social sciences,” Olds said Thursday at a reception at the Palm Desert campus for Future Physician Leaders, a program that helps prepare local students for the medical school.

The new hire, pediatrician Dr. Ashaunta Tumblin, will be developing research on children’s health across the Inland Empire, including the Coachella Valley, medical school officials said.

Olds said he also expects to soon hire a “population-based outcomes researcher,” who can track the impact of programs such as the Clinton Foundation’s blueprint for improving health across the valley.

“A lot of the work I do, HARC does provide the data for,” said Tricia Gehrlein, regional director for the Clinton Health Matters Initiative. “It’s a nice synergy — me, HARC and UCR having the potential to measure the outcomes.”

HARC CEO Eileen Packer sees opportunities for partnering with the medical school for federal grant applications.

“Research not only creates job opportunities, it gives our students opportunities to get involved and pursue careers in health care and research,” said U.S. Rep. Raul Ruiz, D-Palm Desert, who as founder of Future Physicians was also at the Thursday reception.

Ruiz was the medical school’s associate dean for community engagement and partnerships before his election in 2012 and is officially considered on indefinite leave from the position.

Other new programs could be on the way to the Palm Desert campus, but with the Aug. 19 arrival of new Chancellor Kim Wilcox , who has yet to visit the facility, UCR officials are staying mum.

One sign of coming activity, the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership recently moved the staff for its Workforce Excellence program off the campus after the university said it would need the space for other activities, said CEO Thomas Flavin. CVEP was offered other space on the campus, but opted to find new quarters nearby, he said.

With the valley’s health care sector accounting for 12,000 jobs in 2012 and technology in the field constantly changing, he sees ongoing opportunities for economic growth connected to the Palm Desert campus.

“The good message is even though we have to move out, there’s a plan there and a commitment to utilize that as a four-year, higher education institution,” Flavin said. “You always have an advantage when you have a university that has R&D efforts.”

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