

HEARTS IN FAMILY PRACTICE



Scottsdale Healthcare to graduate
35th class of family physicians.

PAGE

3

Residency-program grad Dr. Chris Bonati examines Ted Faz of Phoenix during a visit at Heuser Family Medicine Center. JOSH RADTKE/THE REPUBLIC

Grads dedicate practices to families

Scottsdale Healthcare sending 7 into field

By Jackie Smith
The Republic | azcentral.com

If you asked the 35th graduating class of family-medicine residents at Scottsdale Healthcare how well they've gotten to know each other, they might sit for an instant in silence before simultaneously breaking out into laughter.

That's how it went this week when the new family doctors recalled the roast of attending physicians each class puts on at the program's end. But while such off-the-job experiences may be warm or humorous, some of them say they have learned a lot more about each other's strengths and weaknesses because of the program.

In many scenarios, Dr. Brandy Ficek said, they can be the only people who know why they carry a pager or who can relate to the feeling of losing a patient.

"It's only the other people who are going through it that can understand it," she said.

On Saturday, the group of seven will graduate, entering a medical field unique for its particular brand of physician-patient relationships.

At Scottsdale Healthcare, the Family Medicine Residency class is small and residents say the community-based program is sometimes overlooked, as it is not necessarily tied to a big university with hundreds of residents and medical students.

"You're not really lost in the mix," Dr. Joshua Fronk said. "You're actually treated like a physician, and we all get to know the specialists really well and are on a first-name basis."

Graduates of the program could play a more crucial role in medicine as states across the country continue to see shortages of doctors to care for families, especially children and older adults — the two demographics said to benefit most from relationships in primary care. At 39th, Arizona ranks below the national average in patient-physician ratios, according to the American Association of Medical Colleges.

Dr. Robert Creager, director of the Family Medicine Residency Program, believes everyone deserves having a family physician. They tend to see the earliest and least-defined state of conditions, he said, and know when to order or not order additional tests as they observe a patient.

"Also, it's very nice when you're taking care of grandma over a long period of time," he said, "and her daughter and



Dr. Charalee Smith goes over paperwork during a break between appointments at Heuser Family Medicine Center in Scottsdale. PHOTOS BY JOSH RADTKE/THE REPUBLIC



Smith, one of seven Family Medicine Residency graduates this Saturday, examines Phoenix resident Maria Torres' eye.

granddaughter are in Scottsdale and need to be seen."

As first-year residents, Ficek said, the residents were assigned to patients in clinic who they continued to follow for another two years, as an opportunity to develop patient-specific knowledge regardless of what hospital or specialist rotation they might be on.

She said people misunderstand family medicine in general, underestimating what and how much such physicians actually do.

On Monday afternoon, several worked clinic and checked up on familiar patients.

Dr. Chris Bonati saw a 1-year-old he had delivered. Knowing of some complications in pregnancy for the mother, he asked about little Emily's eating and sleeping habits and other questions of her general welfare.

"This will be the last time I'll be seeing you since I'm graduating," he told the two

at the start of the visit.

It was this bond between patients and physicians that attracted several residents to family medicine, or, as Dr. Meghan Brecke put it, "the perfect marriage of science and humanity."

Dr. Charalee Smith said it was also the autonomy in learning she found attractive in Scottsdale Healthcare's residency program. An experience such as working 36 hours straight, she said, can be a catalyst for independent learning.

New medical residents in any program may not have a similar experience with recent accrediting regulations limiting the first years to 16 hours per hospital shift starting in July. Smith said she was against the change, but that new residents at Scottsdale Healthcare will not necessarily know the difference.

"We've had our attendings tell us, 'Well, when I was a resident, I was in the hospital for 120 hours straight,'" she said, mimicking a lower-toned voice. "Now, we get to say, 'When I was a resident, I was in the hospital for 36 hours straight.' And the newbies get to say, 'Oh, I was there for 16.'"

The Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education, which approved the change in hours regulations, also allowed Scottsdale Healthcare to increase its family resident class size to nine.

"Really, it was somewhat of a reaction to two forces," Creager said, pointing to national health-care laws and the 16-hour rule.

In part, Ficek said, working long hours per shift made the first year as a resident the hardest. At some points in the program,

MEET THE GRADUATES

Scottsdale Healthcare's Family Medicine Residency Program graduates:

Meghan Brecke earned a degree at Touro University College of Osteopathic Medicine in Vallejo, Calif., and plans to return to her native Oregon to join a community-based outpatient practice.

Chris Bonati completed a degree at the American University of the Caribbean in St. Martin and hopes to work in an urgent-care setting.

Brandy Ficek finished her degree at the University of Iowa in Iowa City and will stay in the area to complete a hospice and palliative-care fellowship at Mayo Clinic Scottsdale.

Joshua Fronk earned a degree from the Arizona College of Osteopathic Medicine at Midwestern University in Glendale and is to finish a palliative-medicine fellowship at Stanford University.

Justin Possner also completed his degree at the Arizona College of Osteopathic Medicine and is set to be a hospitalist with Scottsdale Healthcare.

Charalee Smith earned her degree from Ross University's School of Medicine in Portsmouth, Dominica, and intends to return to her native Las Vegas to join a broad-spectrum family practice.

Lenorah Wos completed her medical degree at the University of Arizona and plans to work in rural medicine for underserved patients.

she said it was more about trying to survive.

"Now that we're at the end, we can look back and realize that even when we were exhausted," she said, "those experiences really benefit you in the future."

About half of the program's graduating residents tend to stay in the area, Creager said. The program has graduated more than 200 family physicians, including 35 who work at Scottsdale Healthcare.

Several of the 35th graduating class have plans after their residency's completion — some moving on to medical fellowships and others returning to their native states.

Some of them joke about keeping in touch or running into each other at medical conferences.

"It's one of those things," Brecke said, "that you spend so much time together and get to know each other so well that it seems like time doesn't pass."