



Hospital mentoring programs engage high school students in healthcare careers.

As more and more baby boomers age out of healthcare, the question of who will replace them continues to pop up. While it's important to engage college students, some hospitals are starting to pique the interest of an even younger set. Mentoring programs targeted at high school students raise the possibility that they could one day walk the halls of the same hospital as a physician, nurse or therapy professional.

Joan Perry, RN, a retired nurse, and current director of

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volunteers for Roper St. Francis Healthcare in Charleston, S.C., started the SCRUBS Health Mentoring Program in 2004. Standing for Students Can Really Use Bedside Skills, the initiative was named by one of its four inaugural students. After being approved by the volunteer office, local high school students ages 16 and up are paired with nurses and other healthcare workers and work three-to-four hour shifts alongside them, for a total of 40 hours.

"I think it's great for high school students to come into the healthcare field and see what nursing is about," said Anne Sprouse, BSN, mobile resource pool, who serves as a SCRUBS mentor. "They can figure out if this is what they want to do."

INQUIRING MINDS

Mentors like Sprouse and Nathan Wheeler, BSN, CCRN, nursing supervisor, ICU and rapid response team member, talk to the students about their days, answering questions about the job. Beyond an obvious interest in healthcare, the ideal applicant for the program is someone inquisitive. Wheeler explained, "The SCRUBS we've gotten that have done better are comfortable speaking with complete strangers." To that end, he encourages them to go into the rooms and talk to the patients. Beyond the patient rooms on the floor, the students are also given the opportunity to observe surgeries and visit the nursery.

For some participants, the SCRUBS program is their first experience with a hospital. "It exposes them to something completely different," said Wheeler. "In the ICU, they see things they've never seen before and it changes their perspective on life."

Sprouse observed, "It's one thing to go to a career day at your school. It takes to a whole other level to see what it's like to be a nurse or a doctor."

Wheeler has noticed those students who already have a schedule filled with other activities, meaning they had mastered time management, did well in the program. Added Sprouse, "What they put into it is what they get out of it. Some are really engaged and ask lots of questions. That's what we like."

FUTURE CLINICIANS

Students use the program as a springboard for their future, showing a high degree of motivation. "A lot of medical schools and nursing schools require you have some sort of volunteer time," Wheeler explained. "They use the SCRUBS program to get their hours and improve their application." Both Sprouse and Wheeler have

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mentored teens that later went on to nursing careers. Others have become physician assistants and one past mentee is now in her first year of medical school residency.

The healthcare system and the nurse mentors gain from the experience, too. Each SCRUBS class exposes the hospital to potential future employees. Three of the first four mentees were eventually hired as nurses in the Roper St. Francis system.

As for the mentors, the opportunity to give back to the community is valuable. Wheeler noted, “We’re not a teaching hospital, so the SCRUBS program is a great opportunity for us to really give back and volunteer our time.”

EXPLORING CAREERS

Some 700 miles up I-95, another healthcare system is giving students

the chance to rotate through different departments, exposing them to a wide range of healthcare careers. St. Luke’s University Healthcare Network in Bethlehem, Pa. has the Health Career Explorations Program, which began eight years ago.

In collaboration with Lehigh Valley Workforce Investment Board, Inc., each year the grant-funded program sponsors up to 20 high school students from the Bethlehem school district to work in the hospital 10-12 hours per week. Eligibility requirements for the program are set by the funding agency, but they include income eligibility, and a demonstrated interest in healthcare.

Each hospital department has a mentor that’s willing to guide the students and spend time to help them find a career in healthcare. Victoria Montero, MPH, manager youth development initiatives, said, “Oftentimes, high school students think if you work in healthcare you have to be a doctor or a nurse, but there are so many careers in the network.”

Montero herself is living proof of that. She rotated through another one of St. Luke’s mentoring programs, School-to-Work, which is designed specifically for ESL students. After getting her degree in public health, she now oversees the program she was once involved in as a high school student. At one point, 30 past mentees were employed by the healthcare network, working as everything from bookkeepers to nurses.



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MOTIVATED TEACHERS

Nikol Tews, DPT, OCS, center coordinator for clinical education, has previous experience coordinating physical therapy students who did clinical rotations through the hospital. Because of her ease working with those students, she often mentors high school students. Of the mentees, she said, "They get you motivated and it adds a lot of energy to your day."

According to Tews, a good mentor must be willing to explain not only the therapy treatments, but the rationale behind them. "There's so much you can share that you can't learn in school," she explained. Physical therapy mentors guide the high schoolers and get them excited about the field. As America's population ages, more and more people will need the services of a physical therapist and other healthcare practitioners to stay healthy.

Tews herself works in an outpatient setting. There are over 20 physical therapy sites within the healthcare network where participants in the mentoring program can be placed. "They can see physical therapy is not one straight line. There are a lot of different areas involved," noted Tews. From aquatic therapy to neurological rehab, they can be exposed to different aspects of the profession. No matter the setting, "We try to place students with the PTs who are enthusiastic about their job," she said. "As a healthcare professional, you need to be a people person."

CLASSROOM CONNECTIONS

Beyond the clinical component, there is a strong academic tie-in. All participating students have mandatory tutoring sessions at school and attend monthly professional development workshops at the hospital, where they learn, among other things, job interview preparation.

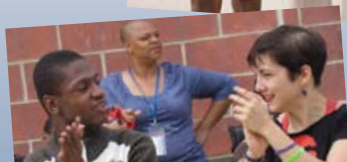
In the hospital, students observe happy, working adults who enjoy their career. That makes a strong impression and drills home the importance of an education. These efforts have paid off, as 100% of Health Career Explorations students have graduated from high school.

Montero advises other healthcare networks looking to start a mentoring project to build a relationship with nearby school districts. "Plan a program that will fit both the school and the hospital." Finding a hospital staff member to organize the program is important to having it run smoothly, as is identifying funding sources early. Starting small and later branching out is also a good bet.

Programs like those at Roper St. Francis and St. Luke's bring the clinician and the community together. With motivated students, the future for healthcare professions does look bright.

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