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HEALTH/NUTRITION—Help for staff-strapped rural hospitals comes with regional solution

CONTACT CAROLYN HOVDE BOHACH at cbohach@uidaho.edu

THE UNIVERSITY OF IDAHO, North Idaho Rural Health Consortium (NIRHC), and Providence Sacred Heart Medical Center in Spokane are preparing medical technologists to help the region's rural hospitals address a critical recruiting issue, said Carol Wilson, NIRHC executive director.

Without trained technicians at a local level, tests have to be sent to and analyzed at remote sites, causing potentially dangerous delays in care.

Fourteen students a year participate in the Spokane medical center's training program to help students earn certification as medical technologists; two students participate in rotations in rural northern Idaho hospitals. Two students will complete the program this spring. Two more, including Machele Gonzalez of Coeur d'Alene, will begin July 13. Gonzalez is working on both a bachelor's and master's degree in microbiology at the University of Idaho and will begin the Providence Sacred Heart program this summer. Her goal is to earn her medical technology certification, work a few years, and become a laboratory supervisor.

The UI partnered with Spokane's school of medical technology "to specifically train future medical technologists to work in rural settings," said Carolyn Hovde Bohach, microbiology professor and UI medical technology degree advisor.

Five northern Idaho hospitals participate. Key to the collaborative program is a \$20,000 investment by the university and the consortium to equip two additional laboratory stations for students, said Providence Sacred Heart program director Cynthia Hamby at Spokane.

The consortium includes Benewah Community Hospital at St. Maries, Bonner General Hospital at Sandpoint, Boundary Community Hospital at Bonners Ferry, Kootenai Medical Center at Coeur d'Alene, and Shoshone Medical Center at Kellogg.

Dale Brown, Benewah's medical technologist, said his hospital is an example of the need for rural medical training. Its three medical technologists provide full coverage for the hospital's needs. That means familiarity with a wide range of duties and equipment, unlike a metropolitan hospital where medical technologists often specialize.

When a doctor must treat a critically ill patient, lab results are essential. "The entire reason we're here is to help doctors make good decisions that can save lives," Brown said.

Nutrition education inspires healthier lifestyles

CONTACT MARTHA RAIDL at mraidl@uidaho.edu or LINDA GOSSETT at lgossett@uidaho.edu

WHEN GROCERY BUDGETS are tight, low-income families must stretch their scarce dollars across foods that are dense in nutrition. Even before the current economic crisis, Idaho ranked 37th among states in food security, with an estimated 66,300 families worried that their incomes won't cover their groceries.

During the 2008 fiscal year, 90% of the 2,065 low-income adults who took a dietary quality class through the UI Extension-administered and USDA-funded Extension Nutrition Program planned to improve their diet. And 85% of 155 participants in ENP physical activity classes resolved to step up their exercise

levels to at least 30 minutes a day. Follow-up surveys found that 87% of respondents ate more fruits and vegetables, whole grains, or low-fat dairy products. Nearly 98% of 433 graduates of UI Extension's Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program—another USDA-funded program that targets low-income Idahoans—showed improvement in at least one nutrition practice.

"There's a strong link between nutrition, physical activity, and health, and individuals who adopt a healthy lifestyle are less likely to develop a chronic disease," says Martha Raidl, UI Extension nutrition specialist.

Idaho youth try on biomedical research

CONTACT CAROLYN HOVDE BOHACH at cbohach@uidaho.edu. Learn more at www.sci.uidaho.edu/inbre/

A NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH-funded biomedical research network provides undergraduate students throughout Idaho with laboratory experience.

The Idaho IDEa Network of Biomedical Research Excellence (INBRE) based at the University of Idaho has funded students, scientists, and projects throughout Idaho. Undergraduate laboratory experiences include internships that help students and Idaho employers, a two-week scholars program for those with no lab experience, and summer-long intensive research fellowships at the University of Idaho, Boise State University, Idaho State University, College of Idaho, and Northwest Nazarene College.

This year the Boise VA Medical Center will increase opportunities for students through the program too.

More than 100 Idaho undergrads typically apply for the 35 to 40 summer fellowships available. Carolyn Hovde Bohach, INBRE director at Moscow, said participants often pursue advanced degrees in biomedical science or careers in medicine because of their research experiences.

DID YOU KNOW?

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NUMBER OF UNDERGRADUATES FROM IDAHO COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES WHO HAVE GAINED RESEARCH EXPERIENCE THROUGH THE IDAHO INBRE PROGRAM SINCE ITS FOUNDING IN 2001.

Source: Carolyn Hovde Bohach, University of Idaho, 2009