Doctors Academy students get behind the scenes look at medical professions

If you think cyst removals and bashed heads could scare them off, think again.

The incoming high school seniors taking part in a six-week Doctors Academy internship program say the summer job shadowing they've just completed has only confirmed their decision to become doctors, nurses and pathologists.

"This six weeks was what I've been waiting for the past three years," said Marco Gonzalez. "At times I'm shocked by what I see coming in. Sometimes I'm excited because I get to see how the doctors and nurses are reacting."

Gonzalez is one of nearly 70 high school seniors who are enrolled in the UCSF Fresno Latino Center for Medical Education and Research (LaCMER) Doctors Academy. There are dozens more in area high schools that start in their freshmen year and continue all four years of high school. Before their senior year starts, DA students shadow medical professionals in the Summer Clinical Internship and Research Program.

A total of 77 health professionals from 15 health institutions including Adventist Health Clinics, Clinica Sierra Vista, Community Regional Medical Center, Selma and Fresno Kaiser Permanente, Valley Children's Hospital and other local clinical sites mentored students to provide real-world experiences. The summer internships ran from June 22 through July 24.

Gonzalez shadowed Dr. Joaquin Arambula in the emergency room at Adventist Medical Center in Selma. After having been rushed to ERs when he was little, Gonzalez said he was eager to learn how to be on the giving end of that care.

"When I was younger I was always in the emergency room with problems with my legs or kidney stones. I want to see what it's like to be on the other side, instead of being a patient," he said.

Arambula said after job shadowing in his youth, he feels compelled to help instill a sense of compassion in the next generations of doctors.

"I got to see a physician who cared," he said. "Often times all you see is in television or read about doctors, but I got to see someone who cared and enjoyed working with his patients,"

A major goal of the Doctors Academy is to inspire the students to return to the San Joaquin Valley to work as medical professionals.

Gonzalez, of Caruthers High, said he hopes to return to the Valley as an emergency room doctor.

Selma High’s Gabriella Viveros, meanwhile, job shadowed at Kaiser Permanente. She’s planning on becoming a pathologist, a doctor who studies the cause and development of disease. She spent her internship with Dr. Sidney Carpenter. Viveros also spent time learning from histology supervisor Marty Hill, also in the pathology department.

"I have been observing the day-to-day work lives of doctors, gross descriptions of organs and the process of making slides," she said.

Like most students, Viveros is realizing that reading about the world of medicine is one thing, seeing it in operation is another.

"It’s completely new actually being able to see the things I’ve done research on. It’s completely surreal," Viveros said. "It’s a huge difference from doing research on a certain organ, learning its function and seeing visuals to seeing it in person. It definitely changed my view on the human body and the medical field."

Viveros encourages freshmen to consider making the commitment to the program and a medical profession.

"It’s a very beneficial program with amazing opportunities in which no ordinary high schooler gets to have. The program has amazing coordinators and an amazing founder, Dr. Katherine Flores, and the summer internship is an experience that everyone wanting to go into the medical field should be able to have," Viveros said.

Caruthers High’s Jeanette Colin job shadowed doctors Mario Martinez and Alex Moir at Adventist Health as well.

Moir, the chief of the family medicine residency program at UCSF Fresno, said his goal is to teach not just more medical knowledge, but also the importance of establishing relationships with patients and building trust.

“When they come here to shadow, my goal is for them to see how we relate to the patients in the community and the joy and satisfaction that relationship and job provides," he said. “[The internship] gives students a sense of what family practice doctors do.”

Elisabete Cortez, a medical imaging lead radiological technologist, shared her expertise in helping students understand the different types of x-rays and what it takes to prepare patients for their individual experience.

Since each patient has a different medical need, the internship experience “encourages them to be more caring about any patient that comes in. You have to adjust and make them comfortable.”

The summer program gives Doctors Academy students six weeks of hands-on clinical and research exposure. Students are placed with health professionals in clinical health
settings three days per week where they learn first-hand, the day-to-day role and responsibilities of providing health care in the community.

The program is under the direction of Dr. Katherine A. Flores, director of the UCSF Fresno Latino Center for Medical Education and Research (LaCMER).

“We are extremely grateful to all of our participating clinical providers and clinical locations for offering our students the opportunity to shadow health professionals and gain direct exposure to careers in health and medicine,” said Flores. “The Valley suffers from a shortage of physicians and other allied healthcare professionals. The health care providers participating in this summer clinical program are donating their expertise and time to help mentor and grow future health care professionals who ideally will remain in the region to provide culturally responsive care.”

Other students who participated in the summer internships had this to say about their experience:

“I had this general idea that it’s just X-rays, but it’s more than that,” said Jimena Yanez of learning about medical imaging. “They do a lot of paperwork. They have to confirm the orders and double-check everything. There’s more to it than just X-rays.”

Yanez also appreciated the medical professionals’ willingness to take on the additional responsibility of mentoring herself and the other students. “Having mentors that agree to have a student with them for six weeks is like a second load. A lot of students don’t the opportunity we’re getting.”

Jeanette Colin said she was thinking of a working as a nurse but then looked into family practice.

“It’s very broad, so I wanted to see what it was like. The procedures done at the clinic were very interesting,” Colin said of watching the removal sebaceous cysts, removals and insertions of birth control device implants, and exams with obstetric patients who had gestational diabetes. “You get to see behind the scenes of what the doctors and neurologists or surgeons get to do and how they interact with their patients. It’s interesting.”

Yadira Magana, also of Caruthers High, wants to interact with patients even more than the doctors get to thus her plan is to become a registered nurse. She said she’s preparing to help patients who are in pain by “just by understanding what the patient is going through and listening to them.”

Learn more

To learn more about the Doctors Academy program at Caruthers, Selma and Sunnyside high schools, log on to www.fresno.ucsf.edu/latinocenter/daabout.html.