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Mark Crosse / The Fresno Bee

UCSF's medical education program has opened the newest of its University Centers of Excellence offices in downtown Fresno. Left to right, affiliated with the centers are Drs. Karl Van Gundy, Conrad Chao, John Ambrose, Dominic Dizon and Michael Peterson.

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Downtown prescription

Growing medical program aims to draw patients to Fresno's core.

By Tracy Correa / The Fresno Bee

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Doctors affiliated with the University of California at San Francisco's medical education program in Fresno have opened a new office they hope will draw more patients — especially those with insurance — downtown.

"Everything good isn't moving to north Fresno," said Dr. Michael Peterson, chief of medicine for UCSF-Fresno, the medical residency program affiliated with the UCSF school of medicine. He was referring to the steady migration of medical offices following population growth.

Peterson and 14 other specialists are now seeing patients in a 2,500-square-foot office at the southeast corner of Fresno and R streets, across from Community Regional Medical Center. The University Central Medical Specialty Center has six exam rooms on the second floor of new building that also houses several other businesses.

The new office features doctors in eight medical specialties: rheumatology, infectious disease, HIV medicine, pulmonary disease, gastroenterology, neurology, internal medicine and lipidology.

Lipidology is a relatively new specialty focusing on lipid and lipoprotein metabolism and associated disorders. The field is growing rapidly with more Americans at risk for coronary heart disease and epidemic levels of obesity and diabetes.

The office is one of four University Centers of Excellence in Fresno.

The other centers focus on cardiology, women's health and sleep-related breathing disorders, internal medicine and natural family planning. The centers are designed to allow core faculty members to continue research, teach and service county clinics, while providing doctors a private practice setting to meet the health-care needs of the region.

The downtown office is the largest of the four UCSF centers in number of doctors and specialties covered.

The doctors are all part of the university's core teaching faculty and split their time between treating patients, teaching medical residents and conducting research.

The doctors at the new center had been treating patients at University Medical Center, the former county hospital that was taken over by privately operated Community Medical Centers 10 years ago. The county hospital, with its multitude of specialty clinics, has been the flagship training center for the UCSF-Fresno program.

But this is changing.

The 15 medical specialists will continue to treat patients at UMC, but they are also hoping to attract more insured patients downtown. It is part of a larger and long-planned vision for making the downtown hospital, complemented by nearby specialty clinics, a regional draw for medical services.

John Zelezny, senior vice president and spokesman for Community Medical Centers, which operates Community Regional Medical Center, UMC and Clovis Community Medical Center, said the specialty clinic will help downtown Fresno become a regional hub for medical services.

"It's a long building process, but this is another piece of evidence that it is getting traction," he said.

When Community took over the county hospital, it agreed to merge critical services, such as the Level 1 burn and trauma center at UMC into its expanded regional medical center in downtown Fresno. This also means bringing along medical specialists.

Zelezny said the plan is all falling into place. "There is no doubt new facilities are a draw, but in addition to that, there is the availability of specialists that, at the core, is central to making the Community Regional Medical Center work."

Peterson said he hopes more patients on the north end of town, who may have had reservations about seeing a specialist at UMC because of its southeast Fresno location or other bias, will venture downtown.

Peterson also hopes the expansion of the UCSF clinics will continue to draw more specialists to the area.

The UCSF program in Fresno has made great strides in recent years.

Peterson, a specialist in pulmonary and critical care, was recruited 41/2 years ago from the University of Iowa and has been instrumental in recruiting other doctors to teach and practice here.

"I would not have come unless I got the sense of commitment to growth and development," he said.

Peterson has helped recruit other specialists to Fresno. They include Dr. Dominic Dizon, whose specialty is internal medicine and came to Fresno from Texas A&M, and Dr. John Ambrose, who was medical director of the Cardiovascular Center at Saint Vincent's Hospital and Medical Center in New York.

Since 2003, 41 specialists who practice and teach in Fresno as part of the UCSF program have been hired. They include experts in emergency medicine, family and community medicine, internal medicine, obstetrics/gynecology, pediatrics, psychiatry and surgery.

Dr. Joan Voris, associate dean for the UCSF Fresno Medical Education Program, said the new specialty center is something that will benefit downtown Fresno, patients and Community Regional Medical Center.

"Clearly, hopefully it does bring people downtown. Something we would like to see," she said.

Said Peterson: "There is nothing but potential here."

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Kathleen Comstock, office manager, performs clerical work with a view of Community Regional Medical Center. John Zelezny, senior vice president and spokesman for Community Medical Centers, says UCSF's Centers of Excellence will help downtown Fresno become a regional hub for medical services.