VALUE-able experience

Starting in August, 10 third-year medical students from the University of Minnesota will follow patients at the Minneapolis VA Health Care Center for 10 months. During that time, they will go through the rotations third-year medical students typically do (but simultaneously rather than in the traditional block pattern) and they’ll learn about quality improvement, patient safety and playing on an interdisciplinary team.

Those students will be the first to take part in the VA Longitudinal Undergraduate Medical Education Program or VALUE—a new longitudinal clerkship created by the University of Minnesota Medical School. It’s the third offered through the university. The first, the Rural Physician Associate Program (RPAP), is one of the oldest in the United States. Participating students spend nine months working in a community in greater Minnesota under the guidance of a family medicine preceptor. They are exposed to rural practice in hope that some of them may one day choose to work in such a setting. More than 1,300 students have gone through RPAP since it was created in 1971. In 2010, the medical school added the Metropolitan Physician Associate Program (MetroPAP), which is similar but exposes students to practice in urban areas of need.

What distinguishes VALUE from the other longitudinal clerkships is its emphasis on quality improvement. “We hope the students will one day be leaders in doing quality improvement initiatives,” says Nacide Ercan-Fang, MD, director of the program.

Those who participate in VALUE will complete simultaneous rotations in medicine, psychiatry, neurology, internal medicine, general surgery, urology and otolaryngology. Each will be paired with an internal medicine preceptor and assigned a panel of 50 patients whom they’ll follow throughout the 10 months. “These will be patients with multiple problems and chronic conditions,” Ercan-Fang says. “Their care usually requires going to multiple clinics and specialists.”

Students will follow patients who come into the emergency department and are referred to a specialty clinic or admitted to the hospital. “The point of following them isn’t only to learn about medicine but more to learn the process of care. Where are the holes in the process of taking care of patients?” says Amy Candy Heinlein, MD, a staff physician at the VA who helps lead the program.

The students will use those experiences to design a project aimed at improving patient care or operations within the medical center.

Candy Heinlein says the VA is ideal for such an experience because all specialties are under one roof. In addition, the VA has long had an interoperable electronic health record, so students will be able to access data on the patients in their panel to see how many of them have uncontrolled diabetes or high blood pressure, for example, and target a special intervention toward those patients.

Ercan-Fang says they were pleased to have 20 students apply to the program. “We didn’t know how much interest this would generate,” she says. “We were pleasantly surprised.” She adds that one student has already expressed interest in post-traumatic stress disorder. “I was able to connect him with a mentor,” she says. “So already he will be able to get going on a project with this patient population.” – KIM KISER