Ask a medical student knee-deep in residency interviewing about the impact location has on their rank list, and they’ll tell you it plays a significant role. After four years of grueling academics and demanding rotations, for a lot of students the ‘where’ is just as important as the curriculum, program facilities and faculty.

At North Carolina’s only coastal-based family medicine residency program -- the New Hanover Regional Medical Center Family Medicine Residency -- promoting the lifestyle advantages of training near the beach certainly gets the attention of students. But the true strength of the program and what’s led it to have such strong recruiting over the last decade is its well-rounded training experience that builds on its dual-accreditation, its faculty diversity and thorough training.

Founded in 1997 and now operating as a dually accredited AOA/ACGME community-based program, New Hanover residents and faculty hail from all over the United States. Over 50% of the program’s graduates stay in the immediate Wilmington region after graduating, with as much as 70% residing in state. That’s a strong testament to both the program and gives support to the saying that, ‘once you get to New Hanover, it’s hard to leave.’

Coastal Family Medicine Training at its Best

New Hanover currently trains six physicians each year, with classes equally split between osteopathic and allopathic physicians. In 2006, the program became North Carolina’s first dually-accredited family medicine residency program, and later, in 2010, was able to expand the number of training slots it offered through the Affordable Care Act’s Primary Care Residency Expansion Program (PCRE). The combination of MD and DO education has allowed the program to develop a unique training experience.

“Our combination of allopathic and osteopathic training has allowed our physicians in both disciplines to learn from each other. Our osteopathic physicians show their allopathic colleagues techniques we might not be able to learn otherwise, and vice versa. Plus, it’s opened up some services to patients we couldn’t have provided before,” explained Dr. Janalynn Beste, New Hanover’s residency program director. Dr. Beste came to New Hanover in 2007 from East Carolina University where she had previously served on the
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school's family medicine faculty, including being its residency program director.

According to Dr. Beste, New Hanover’s participation in the PCRE has been extremely beneficial. One critical advantage has been a shift in how the program is perceived in terms of its relative size among recruits.

“I think for a lot of our prospective trainees, our current size is just right now, not too big or small,” she explained. “Our residents feel they have an ample number of colleagues to learn from, but don’t feel lost.” Beste pointed out that the expansion has also helped the program’s clinical operations, including its inpatient and outpatient services, and has introduced more diversity into its training experiences. The program will graduate its first six-person class later this year.

Right-Sized & Diversified Physician Training

New Hanover’s attractive coastal location draws student interest, but its overall training program is really what holds it. The program stands out by providing a diverse training program that’s delivered through a dedicated, well-rounded, and experienced faculty, in facilities that are large but enable a small close kni experience.

The program’s in-patient training center is New Hanover Regional Medical Center (NHRMC), an 855-bed teaching and referral hospital that serves patients from up and down the NC coast. NHRMC is everything you would expect in a key regional referral hospital. The hospital provides an exhaustive range of ambulatory, surgical, and clinical services, and acts as an important hub for Wilmington’s medical community. But for a larger hospital like NHRMC, it only houses a total of four residency programs. This affords New Hanover residents with the in-patient training experience of a large hospital, but reinforces a close-knit, collaborative feel with the local provider community.

One key area where this becomes an advantage is in pediatric and hospitalized children’s health training. NHRMC does not house a pediatrics residency, so New Hanover residents receive a unique experience. New Hanover residents work side-by-side with Southeastern AHEC pediatric faculty in the hospital’s newborn nursery, its general pediatrics unit, as well as its pediatric ICU.

“I think our residents get some of the best pediatric training experiences I’ve ever seen in a residency program,” Beste noted. She stated that all pediatric attending treats New Hanover residents as their own and as a result, program residents serve an inordinately large number of pediatric patients. Additional experiences in adolescent care are available through Wilmington Health Access for Teens, where a faculty member is medical director, which helps draw New Hanover residents into the local community by conducting sports physicals and other related services.

New Hanover faculty and residents operate their own family medicine in-service at NHRMC serving its clinic patients, the unassigned, and a frequent number of patients admitted by community physicians. Beste notes that many of these residents enjoy the challenges,” noted Beste.

For its outpatient training, New Hanover residents staff an NCQA-recognized Patient-Centered Medical Home that features a full stable of clinical, diagnostic and integrative services. The clinic serves a diverse patient population that reflects its coastal roots, but also its geographic proximity to several military installations. The clinic’s patient population includes a large Medicaid base, with significant numbers of retired Medicare beneficiaries, and a growing military population.

Looking to the Future

New Hanover’s first residents graduated in 2000. Since then, the program has graduated a total of 58 family physicians. With an eye towards the future, the program is working to identify ways to improve the physician training experience while recognizing the changes taking place in family medicine and overall healthcare delivery.

One approach under investigation is expanding the program’s collaborations with its local medical community. Dr. Beste noted that while the potential of these are promising, solving the sustainability puzzle continues to be a challenge.

“Trying to figure out creative ways to pay for and reward collaborations with our medical community is our greatest challenge,” she explained.

The program is also working to leverage the practice management training its residents receive to help drive quality and cost improvements throughout the local medical community. Because New Hanover graduates enter practice as highly-skilled with health information technology like EHRs and are knowledgeable with approaches like disease registries, population management, value-based payment and accountable care, New Hanover alumni have already begun to help drive change in their practices, both locally and across the state. In the Wilmington region, this is helping local primary care practices transform.

“Our residents receive a fantastic education, are clinically well-prepared, possess great practice management knowledge, and are comfortable with the changes taking place in care delivery. These are exciting times for our graduates and the program.”

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national level – is here to help. But we can’t do it all. We need you to take the opportunity to learn about value-based payment models. We need you to be a leader in your practice, in your community and in your health system. We cannot afford for family physicians not to be at the table.

We’ve already seen some systems speak about moving to value-based care but still pay their primary care physicians based on volume. They’ve not given the primary care practice the resources needed to truly manage their patient populations. We’ve got to demand better, but we need your help. I believe the future of healthcare is built on a foundation of family physicians. But we simply can’t afford to sit back and let change happen to us. That foundation will only be strong if family physicians are helping drive the change.

So today, I’m urging you. Get educated. Get involved. And demand better. Only you can help drive the positive change.