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Hospitals seeking alliance with UC Riverside medical center

New medical school would benefit the valley

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Two Coachella Valley hospitals are interested in training students at a future UC Riverside medical school.

"They are looking for sites for third- and fourth-year medical students for clinical rotations, and they also have a need for new residency spots," said Karolee Sowle, CEO of Desert Regional Medical Center in Palm Springs, who confirmed she had met with university officials.

"They will be working with more than one hospital and we're hoping to be one of them," she said.

The UC Regents unanimously voted to approve the new school at their July 17 meeting in Santa Barbara. The \$508 million project will be based in Riverside, but partner with established hospitals for student training and residency programs, said Dr. Phyllis A. Guze, executive director of planning for the new school.

Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage is also being considered, Guze said.

"We understand the Coachella Valley has lots of needs," Guze said. "What we will be doing with medical students and residents is giving them experience in ambulatory, outpatient care in areas for underserved (patients) so they have a broad appreciation of health care needs."

"We look forward to continuing to work with UC Riverside as the program develops," Eisenhower CEO G. Aubrey Serfling said in a statement.

School officials expect to finalize details on hospital partnerships by fall 2009, Guze said, and both Desert Regional and Eisenhower could be involved.

"At this time, there is no reason to believe that there can only be one partner in the valley," she said. "However, partnerships may be phased in with one first and then the other."

Plans call for the school to accept its first class of 50 students in 2012, with an eventual enrollment of 400 students and 160 residents by 2021.

It would be the sixth medical school in the UC system and the first new public medical school in California in more than 40 years.

The impact for the Coachella Valley could be far-reaching, bringing the area more doctors, better care and new business.

"This is an opportunity to create the kind of synergies that create more jobs and better health care all around," said John Soulliere, president of the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership.

"You'll see this ramping up. You'll see more people getting interested in health care as a career."

Key benefits for the valley could include:

More doctors: Like many non-metropolitan areas in California, the Coachella Valley is short of

doctors, area health care officials said.

"We're recruiting about 13 doctors this year," said Sowle, who sees the medical school as an invaluable source for locally trained physicians.

"When they get to know your community, they are more likely to stay," she said.

Guze added that communities pulling in more new doctors are also likely to attract more nurses, pharmacists and other health care professionals.

"We can develop more of a team approach," she said. "(When) you can get more doctors in, you can get more health care providers in the environment."

Better care: Medical schools also tend to have a major impact on quality of care in a region, experts say.

"When you have medical school faculty coming to local hospitals to give lectures or to do rounds, they are teaching all the while," said Dr. Glen Grayman, president of the Health Assessment Resource Center, a Palm Desert nonprofit that recently produced the first comprehensive survey of health care needs in the eastern Riverside County.

"Not only are they teaching the medical students and residents, they are teaching nurses and other health care workers," Grayman said. "It raises the whole level of quality of care offered in that hospital."

Students and residents also tend to spend more time with individual patients, he said.

"Residents may be able to spend a half hour or even an hour identifying all the particular aspects of a person's health needs," he said.

UCR will also offer extra training for doctors at the hospitals it chooses as partners, with faculty development beginning in 2010, Guze said.

"We would help increase their skills for teaching," she said. "We would do continuing medical education."

Better access: More than 80,000 adults in the Coachella Valley have no health insurance, according to the Health Assessment survey, and even those who do often cite lack of transportation as a major obstacle to getting the medical care they need.

UCR officials envision the new medical school focusing on community health and sending students to work in underserved regions.

"We're not going to have our students and residents sitting in the hospital waiting for somebody who's very sick to come in," Guze said.

"We're going to be coming out and talking with people."

She also sees the school using new technology and running experimental programs to improve people's access to health care.

"Transportation is a major issue. Should we be taking vans out to the areas?"

Biotech: Medical schools also foster research, drawing grant money and venture capital to an area, said Steve Weiss, president of the Coachella Valley Angel Network, a group of area investors providing seed money for start-ups.

Weiss sees the new medical school driving a biotech surge in the valley within the next 10 to 12 years.

