Education in an Ambulance

Thomas Blackwell, MD, remembers how long it took as a medical student to reach the point where he was seeing patients in a clinical setting—two full years.

“I never put a white lab coat on until the end of my sophomore year of medical school and never even thought of seeing a patient until then,” said Dr. Blackwell, director of the EMT program at USCSOM Greenville.

Things are different at this innovative new medical school, set on GHS’ Greenville Memorial Medical Campus. Students spend the first six weeks of their medical education being trained as EMTs and then continue to work 12-hour shifts throughout their four years of school. USCSOM Greenville is one of two medical schools in the country with such a program.

“Here, first-year students are given knowledge and skills and some experiences where they’re actually touching patients and learning how to treat patients at a basic EMT level,” Dr. Blackwell pointed out.

The six-week training culminates in an elaborate simulated disaster on this campus, in which students must put their new knowledge and skills into action along with teamwork and quick decision-making.

“Although everything was simulated, the exercise was carefully and thoroughly staged with victim-actors in full clinical make-up and professional first responders from the Greenville community,” explained Dr. Blackwell.

Once the exercise was complete, the newly trained EMTs began interacting with real patients through their regular shifts. And although that was a perk in and of itself for these students pushing through what are generally thought of as pre-clinical years, Dr. Blackwell acknowledged a benefit of even greater importance.

“They’re seeing different populations and communities that they’ve probably never been exposed to before—specifically, the disenfranchised clientele who seem to be frequent users of the 911 system,” he noted.

Dr. Blackwell continued, “These students, who come from various walks of life, are going in to the inner city, and they’re seeing how the disenfranchised populations in our communities live, some of the obstacles to health care, some of the barriers that they’re faced with in their daily lives. A lot of these people don’t have primary care physicians, transportation or money to buy medications that they were asked to get. It’s been an eye-opening experience for these students, and maybe they will think twice before criticizing their future patients because they have seen that it’s a different world out there sometimes.”

Dr. Blackwell said the program has made waves around the country.

“We’re actually the topic of discussion among academicians across the United States, at least in my circles,” he stated. “Many other medical schools and universities are very jealous of what we’re doing.”

The program also benefits Greenville County, which has added 53 certified EMTs to its roster. When the medical school reaches full enrollment in 2018, that number will climb to 400.

For more information, call Dr. Blackwell at (864) 455-1571.