

Student nurses hit the trenches

By Special to The T&D

COLUMBIA - As a child, Brandis Singleton never spent much time in a rural area. So on her first trip to the sparsely populated Hampton County, she toured Main Street, ate at a country kitchen restaurant, scoured the local paper, ate a bag of boiled peanuts, and scouted out a local high school bumper sticker to learn more about the area.

The same trip would offer the Charleston native some other firsts: her first visit to a septic tank installation, her first inspection of a summer lunch "feeding" site and a country-road ride with Low Country Environmental Health staffer Stephanie Carroll to Estill to check on a potentially rabid dog.

Singleton and 24 other rising junior and senior nursing students around the state are in the public health trenches this summer through the S.C. Rural Interdisciplinary Program of Training (SCRIPT). Sponsored by the Low Country Area Health Education Consortium (AHEC), in collaboration with Mid-Carolina, Pee Dee and Upstate AHECs, SCRIPT places nursing students in S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control public health clinics for five weeks to get clinical training and a taste of community health in rural areas.

"In order to be a good health practitioner, you have to understand the difference between you and where you came from and the people you are trying to help," said Diane Kennedy, director of Low Country AHEC based in Varnville. "SCRIPT gives these students an opportunity to work in interdisciplinary teams with the many cultures represented in rural areas."

This summer 86 students from 12 disciplines are participating in the 11-year-old rural internship program funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration's Bureau of Health Professions and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. SCRIPT places the students in health and medical facilities ranging from pharmacies to hospitals to community health centers. SCRIPT seeks to raise awareness of community health issues while making rural health more attractive as a career goal.

"The nationwide nursing shortage has made it increasingly difficult for South Carolina to attract and retain nurses, particularly in areas where there are no large hospitals to practice in and with the quiet lifestyles that are not to everyone's taste," said Ann Lee, DHEC director of nursing. "SCRIPT might not immediately attract traditional young nursing students to a career in public health, but it gives them a taste of what we do so that somewhere in their career, they might choose to pursue an area of public health that they particularly enjoyed."

Kennedy said in an alumni survey done in 2001 of students who completed the program from 1993 to 1999, 55 percent said they were either working in a rural setting or would look for one after graduation. In pre- and post-course testing of students, 97 percent said they had an increase in knowledge that included working in interdisciplinary teams, cultures other than their own, and rural health issues including barriers to care.

While Singleton said she aspires to work in a large city hospital after graduation from S.C. State University, "I could see myself working in a health department when I get tired of the hospital.

"Working in a rural area is an experience all nursing students should have, and maybe one day they would come back to work in a rural community where there's a desperate need for this field," she said.

Student Barbara Benson enjoys the interpersonal relationships that Saluda Public Health Department nurses have with their clients in the rural Midlands community. She has particularly enjoyed working with the Home Health Services teams, a program she previously was not aware the agency provided.

On a recent home visit with physical therapist Valerie Rikard, a homebound patient was unable to move a rolling walker through a narrow doorway. Rikard solved the problem by moving the wheels inside the walker. She and nurse Jennifer Hipp also can spot when nutrition supplements sit on a counter unused, leading to poorly mended wounds, and can monitor for proper medication use, noted Benson, a Greenwood-based social worker who is pursuing nursing as a second career.

"They have learned over the years how to help people adapt to their home environment. They address problems in unique and tactical ways, but they always do it in a human way," the S.C. State University student said.

"Every day is different, and I learn a new aspect of DHEC I did not realize the agency provided," Benson added. "I really would consider Home Health as a field."

As part of their summer training, SCRIPT students also conduct a community needs assessment for presentation. Singleton chose heart disease and stroke to present at a county farmers' market. Benson's interdisciplinary team conducted diabetes education at a senior center in Edgefield.

Other students have conducted church-based immunization projects, developed walking parks, or reviewed medication use with seniors.

"These projects are truly population driven," Kennedy said. "What we try to teach the students is that the community knows what it needs. You just have to take time to talk to and listen to people in the community."