



SC AHEC training program is nation's best

*by Cindy Abole
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The South Carolina Area Health Education Consortium (AHEC) recently received special recognition from among the nation's 46 other AHEC programs for its excellence and collaborative educational partnerships with statewide institutions, health care professionals, and underserved communities all designed to improve health care for South Carolina's residents.

David Garr, M.D., the executive director of the South Carolina AHEC, along with others from South Carolina, accepted the prestigious Eugene S. Mayer Award at the National AHEC meeting held June 11-14 in Omaha, Neb. The award, which is presented every two years to a model statewide AHEC system, is named in the memory of Dr. Eugene S. Mayer, founder of North Carolina AHEC which, along with South Carolina, was among the first 11 states in 1972 to receive federal funding to establish an AHEC program.

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"I accept this award on behalf of many individuals – our predecessors as well as the current team who have worked so effectively and with such commitment during the past 34 years to accomplish all that we have in our state," said Garr. "This award recognizes the excellent work that has gone on in the past in South Carolina and which continues at the present time."

The South Carolina AHEC was created to address South Carolina's significant health care workforce needs by providing recruitment, retention, and educational programs for present and future health care professionals.

Garr, who assumed the leadership role in January 2003, helps coordinate the work of the Program Office in Charleston and the four AHEC Centers located in Greenville, Lancaster, Florence, and Varnville. As Director, Garr works closely with AHEC's leadership councils and with the four AHEC Center Directors. He reports to the MUSC Provost and to the MUSC Board of Trustees.

"The AHEC councils and the AHEC Center Directors are a valuable resource," Garr said. "We work well as a team to guide our statewide program and to maximize its effectiveness."

Under the South Carolina AHEC, partnerships with the University of South Carolina, MUSC, Clemson University, and other institutions have thrived

and produced innovative programs for health care professionals and students. For example, the Family Medicine Rural Clerkship has introduced USC and MUSC medical students to rural health care and the value and gratification that comes from providing care to South Carolina's underserved populations. Another program, the South Carolina Rural Interdisciplinary Program of Training (SCRIPT), a national model for interdisciplinary education, has provided more than 700 students during the past 13 years with a chance to live, experience, and deliver health care in clinical sites throughout the state.

"MUSC and USC train the majority of physicians and other health care providers who ultimately practice in South Carolina," said John Raymond, M.D., vice president for Academic Affairs and Provost. "AHEC provides a critical link between our institutions and rural sites where much of the health care is delivered in our state. Without AHEC, our ability to effectively deliver health care across the state would be severely impaired."

An important element of the AHEC mission is to identify young people who want to work in the health care field. The South Carolina AHEC Student Development and Diversity Program encourages and provides guidance to these students. For example, each summer for the past several years the South Carolina AHEC has sponsored an intensive program for under-represented minority and disadvantaged students interested in considering health care careers. Held each June, students are exposed to a wide range of health professions disciplines and receive special preparation in areas that will help them be successful in their pursuit of advanced studies in the health professions.

In June 2006, the South Carolina AHEC received word that it was awarded a three-year, \$900,000 Duke Endowment grant designed to help establish coalitions in each of the four AHEC regions. These coalitions will develop regional initiatives and programs to promote health care careers among middle and high school students. The premise for the program is to build a collaborative working relationship between schools, area businesses, health care, faith communities, civic organizations, and other groups to encourage and support youth who want to pursue careers in health care.

Other AHEC services include the provision of educational programs for health care professionals. In 2005, the South Carolina AHEC provided more than 35,000 health care professionals with continuing education and training programs throughout the state. The South Carolina AHEC's Information Service provides health care providers, students, and preceptors working in communities with access to the online MUSC Library resources.

Looking to the future, Garr and the South Carolina AHEC team plan to continue to address the health care workforce needs in South Carolina. The team wants to maintain its present focus on youth, health professions students, and frontline health care professionals throughout the state. Garr would also like to expand the focus on interprofessional education, preparing teams of health care workers to practice together to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the state's health care delivery system.

“We need to make sure we’re doing everything possible to help grow and sustain our workforce and provide them with what they need to be successful in their current jobs and professions,” Garr said. “The future is very bright for AHEC as an organization as we work to help address the health care needs of South Carolinians. We have an excellent group of people in this organization and positive working relationships with organizations and groups throughout the state. No single program can succeed by itself. AHEC has been successful as a result of the partnerships that have been built and maintained for more than three decades.”

“Under the leadership of Dr. Garr, the South Carolina AHEC system has taken on a national leadership role in using innovative methods to promote interdisciplinary rural health care and wellness education, to address health care disparities, and to inspire the next generation of health care trainees to consider careers dedicated to service in geographically and economically underserved areas. This award is a mark of distinction for Dr. Garr and for his outstanding team of remarkable and dedicated AHEC Center Directors, staff, teachers and health care providers. We are fortunate to have such an outstanding organization in South Carolina, where our needs are so great,” Raymond said.

For information about the South Carolina AHEC, visit <http://www.scahec.net>.

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