KU Medical School expansion in Wichita, Salina aims to reduce rural physician shortage

WICHITA, KAN., – To address the critical shortage of rural physicians in the state, the University of Kansas School of Medicine will expand its existing Wichita branch from a two-year clinical program to a full, four-year program as well as expand to a four-year program in Salina.

In addition to increasing the number of rural health physicians in Kansas, the Wichita expansions (the KU School of Pharmacy–Wichita will open in the fall of 2011 with 20 students as well) will contribute an additional $30 million annually to the Wichita economy.

The Wichita and Salina sites will each welcome their first class of four-year medical students in the fall of 2011.

Presently, students in KU’s 35-year-old Wichita program spend their first two years at the Kansas City, Kan., campus before going to Wichita for two years of hands-on, clinical training. Students will now be able to spend all four years in Wichita.

“Thanks to our partners in the community, the support of KU and the KU Medical Center, and so many gracious donors, Wichita’s goal to have a full, four-year medical school campus will soon be a reality,” says H. David Wilson, MD, Dean of the School of Medicine–Wichita.

An existing Rural Track program in Kansas City sent four students to Salina for clinical training. With the expanded program, students interested in rural health careers may now complete all four years of their training in Salina.

The university’s plans are officially moving forward after Wednesday’s announcement of a favorable review by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME), the accrediting authority for medical education programs, which visited the Wichita campus and the proposed Salina site in July.
University leaders estimate that the annual economic impact of the Wichita campus will increase from $49.7 million to about $80 million with the growth of the medical school and the addition of the KU School of Pharmacy–Wichita.

The Wichita Campus has already served as a model for other medical schools that have started community-based, branch campuses. In partnership with the Robert J. Dole VA Medical Center, Via Christi Health, and Wesley Medical Center, the Wichita Campus has about 130 faculty members and more than 900 volunteer faculty physicians in a range of specialties. The school supports 13 residency programs, including a large number of residents in family medicine and other primary care programs.

“The University of Kansas contributes to the success and vitality of our state by educating students who fill vital workforce needs, such as in health care. KU’s School of Medicine is the only medical school in the state, and the expansions in Wichita and Salina will enable us to educate more physicians who will go on to improve the lives and health of Kansans,” says KU Chancellor Bernadette Gray-Little.

“For the past hundred years we have been successful in fulfilling our mission of training excellent physicians to meet the needs of our state. Approximately half the physicians in Kansas received medical education at the KU School of Medicine,” says KU Medical Center Executive Vice Chancellor Barbara Atkinson, MD. “Still, there is a growing need for physicians in our state. These campus expansions will help us achieve our common goal: that many of our students will ultimately practice primary care in underserved areas of Kansas.”

State health care leaders agree. “This is the most significant thing to happen to rural Kansas health care in a long while,” says Jerry Slaughter, Executive Director of the Kansas Medical Society.

KUMC leaders believe the Salina program could be a model for other areas of the country where there are critical shortages of rural physicians.

“We’re not the only state that has huge, sparsely populated geographic areas where people need medical care,” says William Cathcart-Rake, MD, FACP, a Salina-based oncologist who will direct the KU School of Medicine–Salina. “The whole mission of the Salina campus is to train physicians in non-metropolitan areas of the state and show these young medical students that life can be good and practice can be challenging outside of the big city.”

The KU School of Medicine–Salina will be housed primarily in space provided by the Salina Regional Health Center, where clinical faculty will facilitate small-group learning. Students will listen to lectures along with their peers in Kansas City and Wichita via interactive television and podcasts, while web-based systems will support most of the curriculum’s laboratory components.

“With today’s technology, we can bring the best elements of a large academic health center to complement the strengths of a community like Salina and give students
the best of both worlds,” says Heidi Chumley, MD, senior associate dean for medical education at KU Medical Center.

Cathcart-Rake and Chumley both praise the medical community in Salina for its support of KUMC programs. “It’s a great model of a partnership between a community and an academic health center,” Chumley says.

The University of Kansas School of Medicine–Wichita is nationally recognized as a pioneer in community-oriented medical education. Since the first class graduated in 1975, more than 1,600 physicians have earned medical degrees. About half eventually established practices in the state, fulfilling the school’s promise of “Educating Doctors for Kansas.”

For more information about the University of Kansas Medical Center’s research, training, and programs, contact Cari Merrill at 316-293-2643.

###