



WWAMI -- Alaska's medical school -- earns No. 1 ranking among primary-care medical schools for 15th straight year

The WWAMI medical school partnership, which includes UAA, has again been ranked first among primary-care medical schools in America, according to annual rankings of graduate and professional schools by the weekly magazine *U.S. News & World Report*. For the 17th consecutive year, the programs in family medicine and in rural health also ranked No. 1. Alaska, through the University of Alaska Anchorage, is one of five states involved in this unique, collaborative medical school that is administratively centered at the University of Washington in Seattle (the others are Wyoming, Washington, Montana and Idaho).

WWAMI has teaching sites for medical students in more than 100 towns and cities across the five-state region. Five state universities and more than 4,500 volunteer physicians and other clinicians in the region join in educating and training WWAMI medical students. Through WWAMI, Alaskans can complete three of their four years of medical school in their home state.

"Alaska's medical students have a tremendous opportunity in the WWAMI program," said Dr. Dennis P. Valenzeno, Director of Alaska WWAMI and Associate Dean for Medical and Premedical Programs at the University of Alaska Anchorage. "WWAMI is a true collaboration involving faculty at six universities in five states who work together to devise, plan and deliver top quality medical education. They function as a unit to execute the innovative curriculum that leads to WWAMI's outstanding reputation in teaching primary care, family medicine, rural health and other specialties that are so much in demand in the region."

Like other medical schools across the nation, WWAMI is facing the challenge of declining student interest in primary care. Discussions on this challenge were held on March 29 at Alaska's 3rd Annual PreMed Summit, attended by 175 participants interested in careers as physicians, an event hosted by UAA and attended via interactive video by participants at UAF and UAS.

"Since 1971 Alaska has been fortunate to have a very productive relationship with one of the best medical schools in the country. The long-standing interest, support, and excellence in primary care has served us well," said Dr. Tom Nighswander, prominent Anchorage physician who is the Clinical Coordinator for WWAMI in Alaska and Assistant Dean at the University of Washington School of Medicine. "Thanks to the support of the Alaska Legislature and Governor Palin, Alaska WWAMI increased its entering class to 20 medical students per year in the fall of 2007."



Biomedical researcher wins grant to study effects of cigarette smoke

Dr. Cindy Knall, faculty member in UAA's WWAMI Biomedical Program and the Department of Biological Sciences, has been awarded a three-year grant of \$209,000 from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to investigate the effects of cigarette smoke on human lung cells.

Dr. Knall, along with School of Engineering undergraduate Blaine Shillington, who's the recipient of an Alaska Heart Institute Fellowship, have designed and built a system in Dr. Knall's laboratory to model the process whereby lung cells are exposed in people who smoke.

The NIH grant, which starts May 1, will allow refinement of their system and continued experimentation to address the mechanisms by which cigarette smoke causes changes within human lung cells. In addition to Blaine, student researchers on this project have included biology undergraduate Heather Zeznock, as well as Jorjana Alakayak and Joshua Proper who are Alaska Native participants in STEP-UP, a program funded by the NIH.

In approving the grant, the NIH reviewers agreed that the project addresses an important public health issue and will provide the potential for undergraduate and graduate student training in research. They also agreed that Dr. Knall's preliminary data amply demonstrated the feasibility of some of the proposed studies, and that as a principal investigator she has a strong track record in training undergraduate and graduate students as future scientists.