A group of medical students from several schools in the southeast region of the U.S. gathered at ETSU for the Quillen College of Medicine’s Appalachian Preceptorship. In addition to attending seminars and panel discussions, students also participated in cultural experiences such as visiting a dairy farm Sayland Dairy Farm to milk cows and feed young calves. Many students had never been on a farm before.

(Chelsea Farnam / Johnson City Press)

Lessons in rural medicine

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Eleven medical students took hands-on learning to the next level as they abandoned their books in favor of a day on the farm Tuesday, milking cows and feeding chickens as part of East Tennessee State University’s James H. Quillen College of Medicine’s Appalachian Preceptorship taking place this month.

The students came from all over the United States in order to learn more about practicing medicine in rural areas. They spent Tuesday afternoon at Sayland Dairy Farm in Jonesborough, where many of them experienced a working farm for the first time.

“I’ve never been on a farm before or been able to touch cows or chickens,” said Mehdi Pourmorteza, a student at the Virginia College of Osteopathic Medicine on the campus of Virginia Tech. “The biggest
surprise for me was ... just coming down here and seeing how it’s like to live on a farm and experiencing how hard it is to live on a farm.”

The four-week Appalachian Preceptorship is a chance for students to work with a primary care physician practicing in a rural area and to learn more about Appalachian culture. In addition to hearing lectures on alternative medicine and panel discussions from rural physicians, students also visited the Carter Family Fold, hiked on the Appalachian Trail, heard storytellers in Jonesborough and visited the dairy farm.

For the majority of the preceptorship, students work in close connection with a physician in locations such as Athens, Livingston, Madisonville, Jellico, Gray, Saltville, Va., and Lebanon, Va. Two students are also located at the Downtown Clinic in Johnson City, working with the homeless and underserved population.

New Jersey native Michael Itidare said he was attracted to the program because of the broad range of care a rural physician gets to offer. Itidare explained that during the preceptorship primary care physicians told stories of stitching up individuals’ hands who had been doing some sort of field work or a primary care physician having the opportunity to deliver a baby.

“It’s primary care medicine, but you’re participating in other forms of specialties,” said Itidare, who attends medical school in Philadelphia. “As an individual with a ton of interests, this could be something that I could really like because you’re not just doing one thing at a time; you’re doing different fields. So that’s what drew me to this program.”

While the diversity of care is a draw, Eddie Reynolds, a student from North Carolina, expressed the sheer need for rural physicians.

“They have very limited resources,” said Reynolds. “Usually the nearest hospital might be 20-30 minutes away, and they do what they can do with the resources they have. They can work seven days a week if need be. ... They see patients of all socioeconomic statuses. They accept all insurances and people without insurance.”

ETSU first started the program in 1985 with just one student, but for the past 16 years, the program has hosted about 12 medical students each year.

“It started as a recruiting thing for the residency program,” said Carolyn Sliger, rural programs coordinator in the ETSU Department of Family Medicine. “But we soon realized it was a focus for medical students to learn about rural medicine and primary care and introduce them to Appalachian culture and care with hopes of them coming back to practice.”

The program has been a statistical success. On the whole, 83 percent of students who attended the preceptorship ended up in primary care, and 55 percent ended up in a rural or undeserved area, Sliger said.

The program, which costs about $15,000 to run each year, is funded by grants. A foundation also has been developed to accept donations for the program.

The Appalachian Preceptorship is just one of the College of Medicine’s rural medicine initiatives. The department of family medicine also holds camps and seminars for high school students and pre-med undergraduate students on the subject of rural medicine.