ETSU’s interprofessional focus aims to change way health care is administered in region

JOHNSON CITY – As the health care landscape changes across the nation, leaders at East Tennessee State University’s Academic Health Sciences Center are working to create new and better ways to teach the next generation of health professionals.

“Traditionally, students in our medical school, college of nursing and the other health sciences go through their learning autonomously. They went through their academic programs with few opportunities for team-based learning,” said Dr. Katie Baker, one of the university’s leading forces behind the educational changes and an assistant professor in the College of Public Health. “We are learning that, as health professionals, we can no longer function in silos. Not only is it inefficient and costly, but we’re not meeting the needs of our patients. So we want to be purposeful about training together in health care teams.”

Many leaders within the ETSU health sciences colleges – the Quillen College of Medicine, the Bill Gatton College of Pharmacy, the College of Public Health, the College of Nursing and the College of Clinical and Rehabilitative Health Sciences – believe that is the direction the health care industry is headed, making it not only important, but essential, for future health care professionals to learn in an interdisciplinary setting.

“We want to educate students in a way that, no matter which health field they are in, they will understand their own role as well as the roles of other health professionals involved in someone’s treatment,” said Dr. Wilsie Bishop, ETSU’s vice president for health affairs. “We want each profession to communicate and work with each other to develop a plan of treatment for a patient. We don’t want patients to even notice where one professional’s role ends and another health care provider’s role picks up. It should be seamless.”

Baker was recently named chair of ETSU’s Interprofessional Education and Research Committee (IPERC), a group 20 individuals tasked with finding the best ways to develop and foster opportunities for students, particularly those in the Academic Health Sciences Center, to learn in an interprofessional setting.

Formerly known as the Interprofessional Education Committee (IPEC), the committee name changed to include the word research, emphasizing interdisciplinary experience at all levels and in all situations.

“Team-based learning works best when it’s in a real-world, hands-on setting,” Baker said. “While students are working on research or in a scenario-based case study, they are learning from one another.”

Baker is hopeful the move toward interprofessional research will open up the university for new grant opportunities, too.

The goal of offering interprofessional learning is not particularly new for ETSU. In 2012, the university launched a pilot program in which approximately 110 students have participated to date.

Taking part on a voluntary basis, the first cohort of students participated in interdisciplinary courses and activities that culminated with a full-scale simulation in March – a staged, third-world disaster that required the students to work together to help refugees arriving at the simulated camp.
“That capstone event was transformational,” Baker said. “It certainly illustrated our strengths in interprofessional education at ETSU, but it also showed us some areas where there is room for improvement.”

The plan to create a health sciences center focused on interprofessional education and research doesn’t come without challenges, Baker noted.

Engaging faculty from all five colleges and providing them with opportunities for professional development, for example, are some of the first tasks, she said.

“It’s not second nature to know how to teach this or to work with people outside of your silos,” she explained. “The challenges we face also include scaling up to the point that all of our graduate and professional students go through the program. You are talking about as many as 450 students going through it each year.”

The other challenge, Baker said, is something she refers to as “the dosage issue.”

“We want to create a program that provides sufficient time and space for as many students as possible to acquire skill in the four core competencies for collaborative practice – values and ethics, roles and responsibilities, interprofessional communication, and teams and teamwork,” she said.

Baker and four other committee members – Dr. Reid Blackwelder with the College of Medicine, Dr. Brian Cross with the College of Pharmacy, Dr. Ken Tillman with the College of Nursing and Dr. Kerry Proctor-Williams with the College of Clinical and Rehabilitative Health Sciences – will travel to Washington D.C. this fall for intensive training on interprofessional education.

“I’m excited to bring back what we learn there and apply it to us here at ETSU,” Baker said. “I’m committed to the longevity of this program. I think it will make a big impact on health care in our region.”

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