Inaugural fellows at ETSU’s Gatton College of Pharmacy entrenched in research, more

JOHNSON CITY – As the first two fellows ever at East Tennessee State University’s Bill Gatton College of Pharmacy, Dr. Daniel Ventricelli and Dr. Rajkumar Sevak are setting the bar high for themselves – and for future participants in the new fellowship program.

Established this year, the Community Pharmacy Practice Research Fellowship is a two- to three-year training program that emphasizes practice-based research, particularly in the realm of prescription drug abuse.

“This is a great way to bridge community pharmacy practice and research,” said Dr. Nick Hagemeier, assistant professor with the College of Pharmacy and mentor for the fellows. “Our profession offers multiple training paths, including clinical paths found in residencies and research paths in graduate programs. This fellowship is a path that combines those two areas.”

As the industry transitions to focus more on quality and answering broader questions about population health, Hagemeier says, the focus in research has become more and more valuable.

“The research is really going to set these two guys apart,” he said. “It is teaching them how to ask good questions, and then they have the skill set to answer them, too.”

The community pharmacy fellowship program is one of only four such programs in the United States.

“It is definitely unique,” Hagemeier said. “And even more so given the emphasis on prescription drug abuse.”

In addition to being deeply entrenched in the university’s federally funded prescription drug abuse research, the intensive program offers each fellow the opportunity to earn a master’s degree in public health through ETSU’s College of Public Health as well as a teaching and learning certificate through the College of Pharmacy. They also do clinical work at the ETSU Charitable Pharmacy inside the Johnson City Community Health Center, a clinic managed by ETSU’s College of Nursing.

“That’s why we offer the fellowship over either two or three years,” Hagemeier said. “It gets really intense when you’re trying to learn research, complete a master’s program, do clinical work and teach.”

It is the multidisciplinary research related to prescription drug abuse that initially drew Sevak to the fellowship.

In India, while receiving his bachelor’s degree in pharmacy and master’s in pharmacology, Sevak was fascinated by how drugs impact the brain and behavior. He conducted nationally recognized research on abuse of stimulants during his doctoral and postdoctoral training. As a faculty member at the University of California,
Los Angeles, Sevak further expanded his research on stimulants prescribed in clinics and the abuse of those drugs on the streets.

When he discovered the team effort taking place with ETSU’s Academic Health Sciences Center to study prescription drug abuse, he quickly applied for the fellowship.

“This is so unique. Pharmacists and public health researchers have come together at ETSU and brought all of their expertise to the table,” Sevak said. “Pharmacy and public health professors joining forces to combat prescription drug abuse is rare, and that creates a fertile ground for research.”

For Ventricelli, becoming a pharmacy fellow wasn’t really in his plans, but he, too, was intrigued by the new program at ETSU.

“I started looking into faculty positions and that’s when I found the fellowship,” he said. “I had no intention of taking on more training, but I couldn’t say no to this opportunity.”

Ventricelli got his pharmacy degree at the University of Connecticut before going to West Virginia University to complete his residency in community pharmacy. It was there, he said, that he realized the bigger picture.

“I worked with an addictions unit at an area hospital. I was really able to connect with the patients, who were struggling with this problem,” he said. “They had great care there, but I know that’s not the case everywhere. That killed me. I want to be able to do more and help as many people as I can.”

Soon, Ventricelli and Sevak will likely be able to do just that.

“Through this program, we’ll have expertise in many different areas of pharmacy practice,” Ventricelli said. “I have no doubt that this experience will allow us to have a major impact on the growing problem of prescription drug abuse as well as other future endeavors.”

Individuals interested in fellowship opportunities are encouraged to contact Hagemeier at hagemeier@etsu.edu or 423-439-6239.

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