

Future doctors frustrated in 'heal thyself' roles

By Melanie Mangum
TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER — On normal days, Matthew S. Dykhuizen is a 23-year-old first-year medical student.

Yesterday, he was a 20-year-old pregnant woman trying to get proper health care.

Mr. Dykhuizen was one of 100 medical students taking part yesterday in a simulation at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, called "Walk In My Shoes."

First-year medical students played various roles yesterday in an exercise designed to teach them about the often frustrating search for adequate health care that low-income, uninsured or elderly people often go through.

The first program of its kind at UMass Medical School, it was provided by Boston-based Community Catalyst, a national consumer health advocacy organization.

The goal of the exercise was to help train medical students to be more empathetic and effective doctors by giving them a sampling of the barriers that many patients face when deal-

ing with health care.

"Your mission is to get the health care your family needs," Deborah A. Katz told students at the start of the simulation. Ms. Katz is a health policy analyst with Community Catalyst.

As in real life, it was often difficult for students playing various roles to get the health care they needed.

Students wore name tags bearing descriptions such as "Chinese Woman, 49" or "African-American Man, 82." Many students were partnered with one or two other students who were playing adult family members.

Each student also had a specific health care problem or another difficulty that they tried to resolve within a mock health care system. Some students were given roles that included vision or hearing impairments, mobility problems or language barriers. Some were insured, and some were not.

They had four weeks to get the health care they needed — 45 minutes, broken up into 10-minute "weeks."

UMass Medical School faculty

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VICE DEAN FOR UNDERGRADUATE MEDICAL EDUCATION

and Community Catalyst volunteers staffed several stations in the medical school lobby, representing various health care agencies. Students often found themselves waiting in long lines at the "examination room," or encountering unhelpful personnel at health insurance stations or at a hospital emergency room.

Linda Cragin, director of the area health education center, and Lois Green, director of the geriatric community clerkship, acted as emergency room personnel at one of the stations.

Depending on which little blue card they picked up, Ms. Cragin and Ms. Green were anything from "very helpful" to "abrupt, and not helpful."

Rachael Youngs, 24, was playing a 36-year-old East Indian American woman with numb-

ness in her arms. She came upon the emergency room table as Ms. Green was trying to find an interpreter for another patient and when Ms. Cragin was in "abrupt" mode.

"Park it for five minutes," Ms. Cragin told Ms. Youngs.

"They threw me back and forth between a couple of people and then told me to wait," Ms. Youngs said of the experience. "It's pretty realistic. But I'm one of the lucky ones. I have insurance and a job and some cash."

The simulation included "work" and "home sweet home" stations, where students had to complete a task at the end of their "week" before going out in the world again to seek health care.

Mr. Dykhuizen, as a 20-year-old pregnant woman, was attempting to get his grandfather

— a 79-year-old man played by Keith E. Boundey, 24 — a prescription filled for his high blood pressure.

Mr. Boundey seemed to relish his role interacting with a woman at the "Your Health Plan" table in a simulated phone call. The two students were initially turned away with no answer to their questions about Medicare, and after they returned, Mr. Boundey grew frustrated.

"I thought they passed some legislation for prescription health care," Mr. Boundey said. "I guess not. So it's all lies."

With 100 students walking among the stations, the scene often seemed chaotic.

"The chaos is almost good, because it adds to the reality," said Dr. Michele P. Pugnaire, vice dean for undergraduate medical education.

Ms. Pugnaire is also a family practice physician in Fitchburg, and she said the simulation resonated with her.

"For each one of these roles, I can flash back to one of my patients," Ms. Pugnaire said. "You can see there's a story behind each one of these people."

She said the first-year medical students were getting an opportunity she never had as a medical student.

"These students are getting to see what it's like to be these patients," she said. "We always kind of saw them from the other side of the fence."

"This simulation reinforces and raises awareness about these health care issues," Ms. Katz said.

Community Catalyst, a national organization, has run the same simulations for other agencies and even for public officials. The agency's first simulation was for a group of public officials in Michigan.

"We hear over and over again that we've got to get our public officials to do this, and to help them understand these problems."

Ms. Pugnaire said the medical school hopes to bring the program back next year. The simulation was required for all first-year students.

She said the simulation will help prepare the students for their upcoming work in the community.