

# A&M planning medical program in Round Rock

## Legislative approval raises questions about prospects for a medical school in Austin.

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**At a time when the University of Texas System is considering whether to establish a medical school at its flagship campus in Austin, the state Legislature and the Texas A&M University System have quietly planted the seeds for medical education a half-hour up the road in Round Rock.**

A \$9 million appropriation slipped into the state budget with little fanfare this year allows the A&M Health Science Center's College of Medicine to offer training in hospitals and clinics in Round Rock, starting in fall 2008 with third-year students.

**A&M officials and legislative supporters say their goal is nothing less than a four-year medical campus, which would require repeated and much larger infusions of cash.**

"The initial investment is made, and we're going to set off down that road," said Nancy Dickey, president of the Health Science Center and vice chancellor for health affairs.

That prospect has taken proponents of a medical school in Austin by surprise.

Some of them consider the emerging program in Round Rock a threat to Austin's chances. After all, two medical schools less than 20 miles apart might be a stretch. Others say that competition is good and that there's no reason the state and region couldn't accommodate both schools.

"We are continuing to explore all the possibilities of the future of medical education with UT-Austin and for the Austin community," said James Huffines, chairman of the UT System Board of Regents. "I do think there will be a critical need for more medical professionals within the Austin community as we grow."

Austin is one of the largest cities in the country without a medical school, and leaders of the city's business, health and civic sectors have long sought one. Huffines made his interest known in 2004 when he was elected chairman by fellow regents.

**UT regents have not formally set a goal of creating a medical school in Austin. Nonetheless, UT-Austin's Dell Pediatric Research Institute, under construction at the site of the former municipal airport, is considered the first major component of an academic health enterprise that could evolve into a medical school. The UT Medical Branch in**

**Galveston already sends students to Austin for some of their training, a practice that is expected to expand.**

"I think our notion is that education ought to be closely tied not only to outstanding clinical activities but also to outstanding research activities, and that (research) is something that the University of Texas at Austin offers which isn't available at the present time in Round Rock," said Kenneth Shine, the UT System's executive vice chancellor for health affairs.

A&M's Dickey said the UT System shouldn't have any qualms about pursuing a medical school for Austin.

"Texas A&M believes the population base is adequate such that if the University of Texas wants to do something in Austin proper, our presence in Round Rock presents no barrier to that," Dickey said. "Frankly, we look forward to creating research and education collaborations."

State Rep. Dan Gattis, R-Georgetown, agreed.

"I have continually told the University of Texas I'll be one of their biggest advocates to put (an Austin medical school) into place. My hope is they'll ... move forward with what they want to accomplish in Austin."

Gattis and state Sen. Steve Ogden, R-Bryan, were instrumental in securing the funding for the Round Rock campus. Both served on a 10-member House-Senate panel that hammered out final details of the state budget.

Gov. Rick Perry, who signed the measure, is an A&M graduate.

A&M didn't seek authorization for a Round Rock campus in its appropriation request to the Legislature, and Dickey called expansion into that city "an exciting bonus."

A&M is also expanding its existing medical campuses in Bryan-College Station and Temple. Dickey said the goal is to double A&M's production of doctors, currently running about 100 a year.

"We've been given a huge vote of confidence by the Legislature, and we're putting every ounce of effort into ensuring we have a high-quality regional campus in Round Rock," said Jenny Jones, vice president for governmental affairs for the Health Science Center.

A&M plans to name a regional medical dean for Williamson County soon, and talks are under way with health care organizations and their senior medical staff members to line up physicians to serve as faculty members, Jones said. The initial group of students could number 16 to 24 or more.

Round Rock's burgeoning medical district, centered on University Boulevard in the northeastern part of the city, is a potential location for the A&M campus, Jones said.

A medical school in Round Rock would benefit the region's economy and patients by attracting more doctors and expanding access to health care, said Greg Hartman, senior vice president of the Seton Family of Hospitals, which is opening a medical center in Cedar Park this year and one in Round Rock next year.

"We think any expansion of academic medicine in Central Texas is good for every person living here," Hartman said. "It helps in recruiting some of the best doctors from around the country. And

local doctors say it makes them better doctors ... because of the discipline and work it takes to be a good faculty member."

Hartman said the region's patient base, entrepreneurial bent, venture capital and other attributes justify a medical school in Austin as well.

A 2002 report by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board recommended that A&M and other medical schools increase their class sizes but said any new schools should be established in El Paso and the Lower Rio Grande Valley, because that is where the need is greatest.

A four-year Texas Tech University System medical school in El Paso is expected to enroll its first students in 2009, now that lawmakers have approved \$48 million in startup money.

The coordinating board said this year that more planning needs to be done before pumping hundreds of millions of dollars into building and operating a medical school in the Valley, and a proposal to create one there passed the Senate but died in the House.

**Courtesy of JB Goodwin**