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Seton, UT eye partnership to bolster training

If approved, program could add doctors here

Austin Business Journal - by [Sandra Zaragoza](#) ABJ Staff

As Seton Family of Hospitals gets closer to finalizing an agreement with the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School that will expand medical education in Austin, the University Medical Center at Brackenridge is preparing to become a focal point of a doctor training program.

The program could eventually employ as many as 400 doctors, faculty members and residents — much needed assets for a city struggling to keep up with the demand for physicians.

Seton officials said a medical education partnership with UT Southwestern would take the region to the next level, in terms of research and the ability to attract top-level physicians and research. UT Southwestern is among the top 10 federally funded medical schools in the country.

“It really is going to improve our ability to do top-notch medical research,” said Greg Hartman, vice president at Seton.

The proposed program would be aimed primarily at resident training. Part of the long-range vision is a third partnership with the University of Texas at Austin, Hartman said.

“You really do have the critical mass to create, down the road, one of the best research facilities in the country,” he said.

If an agreement is reached with UT Southwestern, which Seton anticipates doing by the end of the year, Seton estimates it will spend as much as \$50 million a year on the new medical education program, up from about \$15 million in operational costs for its current program, Hartman said.

Eventually, the program could employ as many as 400 physicians, faculty members and residents. Seton currently has 160 residents in training under a partnership with UT Medical Branch at Galveston.

While Seton is still working on a long-term plan for its medical education program, at least part of that funding would likely be invested in infrastructure, from building laboratories to buying new equipment, Hartman said.

Looking further into the future, a new medical education program could require expanding or relocating its teaching center, Hartman said. One question being asked is whether changes would have to be made to the 150,000-square-foot Clinical Education Center at University Medical Center, which is on the northern fringe of downtown.

But any decisions regarding building expansions are “still a long way away,” Hartman said.

The health care community believes a partnership with UT Southwestern will set the foundation for establishing a medical school in Austin.

At an April luncheon at the University Medical Center, Dr. Kenneth Shine, the UT System’s executive vice chancellor of health affairs, reaffirmed UT’s commitment to establishing a medical school, UT System spokesman Anthony de Bruyn said.

“The UT System remains committed to expanding medical education in the region, and our aim continues to be establishing a comprehensive, research-intensive medical school,” de Bruyn said.

To clear the way for a new residency program, Seton has hired staffers formerly employed by UT Medical Branch at Galveston, although Seton is in negotiations to continue providing some undergraduate medical education for UT Galveston students.

Many in the health care sector are welcoming the expansion of medical education at Seton, which they say will meet a demand for physicians and medical professionals in Central Texas.

“Many of the physicians trained in Austin will stay in the Austin community and will help close the gap for the need for primary care doctors, as well as some specialists,” said Sister Teresa George, vice president and chief operating officer of Dell Children’s Medical Center of Central Texas.

The per capita ratio of practicing physicians in Texas was 157 per 100,000 in 2008, up slightly from 2002 when the ratio was 152 per 100,000, according to a Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board report. But that level remains well below the national average of 220 physicians per 100,000 people.

Nancy Dickey, president of the Texas A&M Health Science Center and vice chancellor for health affairs at Texas A&M System, agrees that the expansion of Seton’s medical education program will be good for the region. The Health Science Center provides clinical training for about 40 third- and fourth-year medical students at its Round Rock campus, but it does not yet have a residency program.

Seton’s partnership with UT Southwestern would “improve the environment for all of us,” Dickey said. “Austin is a big and sophisticated enough city that I don’t see the activities as a [competitive] challenge. It does have a positive impact, in terms of increasing the medical education sophistication of the community.”

Courtesy of JB Goodwin