These away rotations boost future Black doctors, 4 weeks at a time

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A new partnership between Morehouse School of Medicine and Virginia Mason Franciscan Health (VMFH) creates opportunity and enhances representation. Over the long term, it will create major benefits for patients and their future doctors.

The partnership—part of the 10-year, $100 million initiative called the More in Common Alliance—enables medical students from Morehouse, a historically Black medical school in Atlanta and member of the AMA Accelerating Change in Medical Education consortium since 2016, to do four-week away rotations at Virginia Mason Franciscan Health, headquartered in the Puget Sound.

VMFH is one of seven sites in the nation, and the only site in the Pacific Northwest, selected by CommonSpirit Health and Morehouse School of Medicine to address two of the nation’s most pressing health care needs: a lack of physician diversity and the need for more equitable health care.

“We are creating an environment that is welcoming and inclusive to all and this program helps push that forward,” said Ryan Pong, MD, vice president and chief academic officer at Virginia Mason Franciscan Health.

“Having these medical students work with us will hopefully open the pathways for increased diversity,” Dr. Pong said. “The data are very clear that the majority of physicians who graduate from a program stay in that community. One goal is that we welcome Morehouse students here and they stay within our communities.”

AMA policy adopted in 2021 aims to foster greater diversity within medical education and in the physician workforce by supporting medical student pathways to training and creating a more equitable residency-selection process.

The policy calls on the AMA to “work with appropriate stakeholders to study reforms to mitigate demographic and socioeconomic inequities in the residency and fellowship selection process,
including but not limited to the selection and reporting of honor society membership and the use of standardized tools to rank applicants.”

Read more about how the AMA is seeking greater efforts to diversify the physician workforce.

Enhancing learning

The first group of Morehouse medical students began their four-week rotations at Virginia Mason Medical Center in August. The program will host three new students every month for rotations in anesthesiology, urology and system-based practice. The latter is an elective that introduces students to the Virginia Mason Production System, as well as quality and safety systems and practices, aligned with AMA efforts to promote training in health systems science.

Those rotations focus on giving medical students exposure to areas in which Virginia Mason Franciscan Health has notable expertise, Dr. Pong said.

“We know that health care training imprints on trainees for years to follow,” Dr. Pong said. “One of the things we do well is train our learners on health care quality and high value care.

Ashlee Tolbert is a fourth-year Morehouse medical student who recently completed her visiting rotations at VMFH.

“Virginia Mason’s Anesthesiology department is an ideal work environment,” she said. “The attendings and residents offer constructive feedback. I always felt comfortable asking questions, and I was offered countless opportunities for hands on procedural experience.”

In addition to exposure to key rotations, the program also can give students exposure to residency programs in the Northwest, an area they may not have considered pursuing as they look ahead to residency application.

“The program gives students access to different regions and different specialties,” Dr. Pong said. “Our trainees locally will benefit from having a more diverse clinical learning environment with the introduction of the Morehouse students on campus. There’s benefit in learning about how to interact with a diverse set of caregivers, and this is going to make our Virginia Mason residents more culturally competent as well.”

Find out how future advocates get a boost with the Medical Justice in Advocacy Fellowship, an initiative created by the AMA Center for Health Equity and Morehouse’s?Satcher?Health Leadership Institute to empower physician-led advocacy that advances equity and removes barriers to optimal health for people from historically marginalized racial and ethnic groups.
A long-term outlook

The program’s aims extend beyond clinical education. The loftier goal is to change the makeup of the region’s physician workforce.

“Geography and family ties are important,” Dr. Pong said. “These students will go back to Atlanta and think about our programs. Some will come to train with us, however, we will not achieve our goals around diversification of the health care work force unless we build pathways for those our region to learn about and be supported to pursue careers in healthcare.”

“The whole purpose of the More in Common alliance is to broaden the diversity of health care workers, he added. “We need more Black physicians, we need more minoritized individuals providing care to patients in our community. When you get care from someone who looks like you, you get better health outcomes.”

Learn more about diversity’s to help overcome the physician shortage.