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## AHEC flies doctors to rural N.C.

By Kim Nikles  
Staff Writer

Fourth-year medical student Harry Broome remembers when a Burke County man was hospitalized for a turtle bite.

John Turner, a first-year medical student from Charlotte, has decided to practice family medicine in areas that don't have specialized health care.

The Area Health Education Centers program, administered by the UNC School of Medicine, not only offers unique learning experiences to University medical students by flying them to rural clinics but also provides further training to rural doctors and health care to people who otherwise would not be able to obtain it.

In just one of its 5,343 continuing-education programs last year, AHEC served more than 136,245 people, said John Payne, AHEC deputy director for administration.

AHEC sponsors consultation clinics in small towns through nine centers in North Carolina. A UNC medical specialist, who usually brings along a medical resident or medical student, is assigned to each clinic.

The centers — Mountain, based in Asheville; Charlotte; Northwest, based in Winston-Salem; Greensboro; Fayetteville; Wake, based in Raleigh; Area L, based in Rocky Mount; Eastern, based in Greenville; and Coastal, based in Wilmington — serve their surrounding communities.

AHEC relies on the University's Horace Williams Airport, located on Estes Drive, to fly many students and doctors to its centers.

"Medical students would be unable to participate in AHEC programs if they did not have the option of flying to the centers," Payne said. "Because of the amount of studying they do, the students would not have time to drive to the centers."

"When a pediatric cardiologist flies to Rutherfordton, he can get there ... and it only takes him 2 1/2 hours including commuting to and from the airport," he said. Driving to Rutherfordton, however, would take nearly eight hours, Payne estimated.

"Flying saves not only time, but a person can be productive whether in a clinic somewhere else or doing something here (instead of driving)," he said.

The program's six planes flew 3,410 flights in North Carolina during 1991 and 1992. "We flew as far east as Manteo ... and Hatteras ... and as far west as Cullowhee ... and Franklin," Payne said.

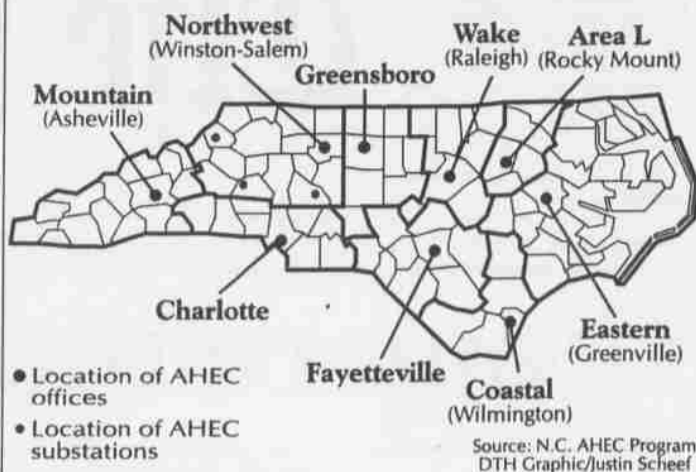
Medical students may participate in AHEC during all four years of medical school, Payne said.

First-year medical students have the option of signing up to visit an AHEC center. "This allows them to get interested in general and family medicine," Payne said.

Turner was first exposed to AHEC when he flew to the Area L AHEC with three other first-year medical students for an informative afternoon respite from their studies. "We went to Heritage Hospital in Tarboro ... and talked to doctors there, and then we took a tour of the town and a local nursing home," he said.

One purpose of AHEC is to recruit physicians to rural areas in North Carolina, Turner said. "I landed in Tarboro expecting to see farms and tobacco, but I was surprised at how modern things were in the hospital," he said. "I was

## N.C. AREA HEALTH EDUCATION CENTERS



shocked." Turner no longer thinks that inadequate medical facilities are the problem in rural areas. What places like Tarboro need are more doctors, he said.

Second-year medical students are assigned to an AHEC location and usually a physician in private practice to learn how to diagnose physical symptoms of illnesses, Payne said.

Third- and fourth-year medical students may do one-month rotations at any of the nine centers, learning, for example, internal medicine in Wilmington or Greensboro, or pediatrics in Charlotte, Payne said.

This year, Broome completed his required rotation of ambulatory care in Morganton, in the Mountain AHEC region. "One of the purposes of AHEC is to introduce students to other community services for health care," said Broome, whose own experiences ranged from working in a prison infirmary to following investigations of child and elder abuse.

The AHEC program receives \$33 million in state appropriations and an additional \$40 million from patient revenues, registration fees, federal grants and hospital support, Payne said. Various departments of UNC Hospitals are billed for the flights they make to AHEC centers at 63 cents per passenger per mile.

Although the fate of the Horace Williams Airport is uncertain as University and local government officials debate its future, Payne is confident that an acceptable alternative to the airport will be found if it is closed.

A committee of local government officials, residents and University representatives was created in May to study alternatives for the airport's future. The panel met for the first time last month.

Previous attempts in 1989 by the county commissioners to move the airport to other locations in Orange County failed when rural residents complained about safety.

UNC officials have said they want to use the airport's present site for other uses, such as a satellite campus, while neighbors of the facility often complain about noise and safety. Horace Williams is located close to three schools.

Payne said he was not sure what AHEC would do if the Horace Williams were closed. The Raleigh-Durham International Airport has been used before, but is not an alternative because of delays caused by both highway and air traffic, Payne said.

People in rural areas served by AHEC would suffer the most if a local airport were not available for use, he said.

"Our mission is to ... provide education and training to meet the health manpower needs, especially in rural areas, for the state of North Carolina," Payne said. "We're the bridge or broker of these programs. It's our responsibility to get those programs out to the community."

Although it's a bit early to say for sure, AHEC's message seems to have reached Turner. "I want to practice family medicine ... and to spend time with folks who can't afford health care, whether I work as a volunteer or as a paid professional."

## Campus Calendar

- THURSDAY**  
1:45 p.m. The Lorelets will sing in the Pit.  
3 p.m. University Career Services will offer information on how to look for an internship in 306 Hanes.  
3:30 p.m. German House will have Kaffeelatsch in Dey fourth-floor Reading Room.  
UCS will hold an interviewing skills workshop in 209 Hanes.  
4 p.m. International Center will sponsor a Wilson Library N.C. Collection Gallery Tour for new American and international English conversation partners. Meet at the entrance to Wilson Library.  
6 p.m. Association of International Students will hold a debate about the election results in 226 Union.  
"Brothers" discussion and support group for African-American male students will meet in the Hinton James first-floor lounge. Information: 962-2175.  
Presbyterian Student Center, 110 Henderson St., will have a student dinner and communion service.  
Lutheran Campus Center, behind ATO on Rosemary Street, will hold a graduate Bible study to paraphrase "Philippians."  
7 p.m. UNC Outing Club will meet to plan the weekend trip to Mt. Rogers in 205-6 Union.
- Students for the Advancement of Race Relations** will meet in the Campus Y lounge.  
7:30 p.m. Volunteers Action Center will have a speaker from the Association of Retarded Citizens to speak about volunteer opportunities downstairs in the Campus Y.  
9 p.m. WXYC will sponsor an Early '80s Dance with costume, trivia and lip-synch contests as well as prizes at the Cat's Cradle until 2 a.m.
- ITEMS OF INTEREST**  
SEAC will hold the Bizarre Bazaar (a yard sale) from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday at 321 Cameron Ave. Donations of second-hand items may be brought to the Campus Y by Friday.  
Footfalls Road Race, 4-mile run or 2-mile walk. Applications are available at the Campus Y and the Union Desk. The race is 1 p.m. Sunday.  
Peer-Advising Program applications are available at the Union Desk, BCC, Campus Y and 116 Steele.  
CAA has applications available for Student Recreation Center president outside of the office in Suite A, Union. Applications will be due at noon Friday.

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