

Rural doctors receive awards

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Problem: Too few physicians practicing medicine in rural and underserved areas of Nevada.

Prescription: Help repay doctors' educational loans in return for time they practice in such areas of the state.

Prognosis: It's working!

In the 1989 session of the Nevada Legislature, Assemblyman Joe Dini of Yerington introduced AB 352, a bill designed to solve some of the problems of delivering health care in rural areas. The legislation earmarked funds to repay the educational loans of doctors who would practice for a while in rural areas.

The program--called the Nevada Health Service Corps--is administered by the University of Nevada School of Medicine's Office of Rural Health and follows guidelines established by the federal government. The first awards will be made this month to:

Dr. Cheryl Winder of Fallon

Dr. James Winder of Fallon

Dr. Richard Ingle of Winnemucca

Dr. Rodney Phillips of Eureka

Dr. Allan Burnside of Lovelock

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"This is an innovative way to support our physicians in rural areas," says medical school dean Dr. Robert Daugherty. "There are so many complications when a community tries to recruit a physician--including the fact that the physician may be practicing alone, or that there is little opportunity to leave for vacations or continuing education classes, or that there may not be work for his or her spouse, or that there might not be a modern hospital in the community--the list goes on and on."

"And," according to Caroline Ford, director of the school's office of rural health, "even when people want to practice in rural communities, it's often hard for them financially to establish a new practice or to keep it going, because the government pays doctors and hospitals in rural areas at lower rates than in urban areas."

According to Dr. Daugherty, the average debt of a graduating physician nationally is \$40,000. "This impacts what specialty new doctors choose to practice and where they locate. Most new physicians also have families--often young families--to support, and they simply can't gamble with their futures."

The new program asks doctors for a time commitment to a rural community. For every 18 months they commit, as much as \$22,500 of their loans can be paid. Only doctors who are trained as primary care specialists--family physicians, pediatricians, general internists and obstetricians/gynecologists--are eligible.