ABSTRACT

Objectives: The Rural Dentistry Scholars Program aims to a) provide opportunities for dental and dental therapy students for individual mentoring by a rural dentist and interprofessional collaboration with public health nurses, medical residents, and other health providers; and b) learn first-hand oral health disparities in rural areas. The ultimate goal is for students to return to rural areas after graduation.

Methods: Dental and dental therapy students apply to the program in their 2nd and 3rd year. Students are enrolled in the Rural Dentistry Scholars Program elective course, undergo training in Basic Screening Survey and application of fluoride varnish. Students are assigned a mentor and spend three weeks in their rural practice. In addition students conduct screenings and apply fluoride varnish during county fairs, and at community clinics, and teach oral hygiene in K-12 schools.

Results: 36 dental and dental therapy students were placed with a rural dentist in different counties across the state. Student responses in focus groups and reflection papers show an increased awareness of the oral health needs in rural communities especially among children, discover that a rural practice can be very busy, develop a new appreciation of rural living and gain insights into the life of a rural dentist in and outside of the practice. Students who express intent to practice in a rural community retain their interest, a few conclude they prefer a non-rural practice.

Conclusion: Immersion in a rural community, mentoring by a rural dentist and networking early on in the dental curriculum enable students to gain a more objective picture of the needs and opportunities in rural communities and serve as motivating factors for rural dental practice.