Medical students at Athens’ new medical campus will get some new teachers this year -- patients and workers at St. Mary’s Health Care, Athens Regional Medical Center and other area hospitals.

Beginning Aug. 22, the 39 second-year students at the University of Georgia-Georgia Health Sciences University Medical Partnership will begin accompanying Athens-area physicians who are doubling as clinical teachers for the students this year.

See more photos of the med students.

Working in pairs under a doctor’s watchful eye, the students will be practicing some of the skills they began learning in their first year of study, such as taking case histories, examining patients and simply talking to people who aren’t feeling their best.

“It gives them experience working in a community hospital setting and seeing what patient care is all about,” said Dr. Terrence Steyer, chair of the medical partnership’s department of clinical sciences.
The future doctors began learning how to do those things in their first year, but beginning Aug. 22, they're going to be working with real patients with real ills rather than their first-year patients -- UGA drama students or trained volunteers posing as patients.

“It’s really exciting. It definitely feels like we’re making the transition into real clinical settings,” said second-year student Dylan Lovin as he walked along a corridor in the sprawling ARMC complex off Prince Avenue one day last week.

“I think we’ve been offered a great opportunity by being at these hospitals so early in our medical training,” said classmate Bijal Vashi.

The tour was part of orientation for the students, when staff members at both St. Mary's and ARMC welcome the students, showed them around the hospital and also laid down a few rules.

“We don’t want our patients in the hospital to get something they didn’t come in with,” St. Mary’s infection control director Doug Blomberg said as he tried to hammer home how important it is for hospital workers, including the students, to keep their hands germ-free.

“We treat everybody like family here,” said Mandy Hazlitt, Director of Orthopedics at St. Mary’s. “Our patients chose us. They trusted us.”

Patient care is a team effort -- and doctors who don’t understand they’re only one part of the team will pay a price, Steyer said.

“I’m the physician and you’ll do what I say, and you’ll do it now.’ That’s the kiss of death,” Steyer said.

The student transition is also a big step for the 1-year-old medical campus and the hospitals.

“I can’t emphasize enough how momentous this week has been,” said Dr. Barbara Schuster, dean of the medical partnership campus. “It says a lot about the growing support of the medical community for the campus.”

In the students’ third and fourth years, they will spend a majority of their time learning in the hospitals and other health care settings, depending even more and more on Athens area health providers, Schuster said.

Schuster and hospital administrators hope that students who graduate from the medical partnership will eventually have the opportunity to fill residencies in Athens area hospitals -- the required extra years of training new doctors must take after graduation from four years of medical school.

“That’s our vision,” said Jamey Thaw, the new CEO of ARMC.

Medical residency programs help communities attract physicians even more than having a medical school campus because doctors often remain in the same city where they have completed their residencies, say medical education experts.

But the hospital's board still hasn't decided to go ahead with graduate medical education.
“There’s tremendous support,” Thaw said.

But there’s also tremendous uncertainty over who will pay the start-up costs, which Thaw estimated in the millions.

“I’m very confident we can do it,” he said.

But at the earliest, residency programs would begin three years from now, too late to entice anyone from the medical partnership’s first graduating class.