Doctors-to-be an asset for agencies

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Students in the Georgia Health Sciences University-University of Georgia Medical Partnership won’t be doctors for years yet, but they’re already trying to help some people in Athens improve their health.

As part of a required yearlong course on the basics of clinical medicine, the partnership’s 40 first-year medical students divided up into teams to work on real problems facing Athens-area health agencies.

In at least one case, the medical students hit on a solution that could soon improve health for many older Athenians, according to Eve Anthony, chief operating officer at the Athens Community Council on Aging, where one of the student groups worked.

This week, the students are training Council on Aging workers in how to use their solution - a customized computer database the students built that will keep track of the medicines each Council on Aging client is taking.

Many of the council’s clients take numerous medications, often prescribed by multiple physicians who may not know what other doctors have prescribed.

Sometimes the doctors unknowingly prescribe drugs that work against each other or for some other reason shouldn’t be taken together.

Until now, medical professionals at the council never had an effective way to keep up with their clients’ medications, Anthony said.

“We just don’t have the resources to do this,” she said. “A database is something we’ve been wanting to do.”

The students interviewed Council on Aging clients as well as workers to make sure they understood the problem, said first-year medical student Justin Brooten.
“We found it’s common for people to have a limited level of medical literacy. They’ll say, ‘I take a yellow pill in the morning,’” Broosten said.

This summer, with help from UGA College of Pharmacy interns, Council on Aging workers will begin using the database to keep tabs on the prescription medicines - an average of about 10 a day - taken by about 130 people in the council’s Adult Day Services programs in Winder and Athens.

That will allow health workers to raise a red flag when people in the day services program take potentially harmful drug combinations.

In a second phase, council workers will use the database to keep up with medicines taken by all 600 Council on Aging clients.

“The students have really created something new for the benefit of their clients,” said Dr. Laurel Murrow, a professor at the medical partnership who teaches community health to the first-year students. “I also hope that this project has shown our students how much homes, workplaces and the environment can influence health beyond the biology we are all born with.”

Four other medical partnership student teams also spent the past year building projects to help Athens health agencies.

One team worked with Nuçi’s Space to find a way for the nonprofit to tell area health professionals about its programs. Anyone with a smartphone can point it at a barcode on the poster to link to a video about Nuçi’s Space, which offers help to musicians and other creative people who are fighting depression.

Another group tried to find a way to help indigent clients at the Athens Nurses’ Clinic give up smoking; other students told parents and teachers in Athens’ Head Start and Early Head programs how they can help children avoid asthma attacks.

A fourth group developed an educational outreach program for the University Health Service about a little-recognized health problem that plagues college students - sleep deprivation. The team put together education materials to help UGA freshmen develop good sleep habits - and improved their own habits.

Partnership student Travis Smith is an insomniac who stays up late but has found that a short early afternoon nap helps him stay alert, he said.

It also helps to turn off electronic devices such as laptops and TV sets well before you plan to sleep, and to develop a sleep ritual before bedtime, said medical partnership student Cristina Elstad.
“You want you body to recognize when it’s time to sleep,” said Paul Baker, another member of the student team.