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UMM student is a PAL for local medical center patients

Summary:

(May 10, 2005)-When Mark Twesme heads for his job each week, he tells his college friends that he's "going to play doctor." Twesme is not a doctor, at least not yet. And he isn't playing. But he does play a distinctive and important role at the local medical clinic where he volunteers.

The biochemistry major from Osseo, Wis., is a senior at the University of Minnesota, Morris. For the past two years Twesme has volunteered one day a week at the Stevens Community Medical Center (SCMC) in Morris as a PAL or pharmaceutical assistance liaison.

"I started at the medical center filing records," said Twesme. While filing kept him occupied, Twesme realized that the task wasn't providing him with practical experience for his chosen profession: to become a doctor. Through the assistance of a former SCMC physician, Dr. José Zapatero, and Twesme's faculty adviser at UMM, Associate Professor of Chemistry Nancy Carpenter, the PAL program was developed.

"The program began as Dr. Zapatero and I became aware of this need in our patients," said Dr. Joan Goering, chief of staff at SCMC. "The high cost of medications and lack of pharmacy coverage by Medicare often prevents patients from continuing medications or from taking the best drug for their condition due to cost.

"Mark has maintained a weekly schedule of clients who bring with them their pills or medication lists and W-2 forms," continued Goering. "Mark has had to learn the medications in order to determine which programs are applicable and also the generic names and drug company names for the drugs since the programs vary by income allowed and patients will sometimes qualify under one company and not another. He has also kept up with changes in these programs – which occur frequently. "

During these visits with Twesme, said Goering, he determines whether the patient qualifies for a drug program, fills out the paperwork, and facilitates the process by having the physician sign the forms and write out the needed prescriptions. All of this can be done without the cost of an office call and minimizes the time spent by the physician on each application. Often the patient will qualify for free medications and these are shipped in 90- day supplies with renewals determined by the physician prescription, added Goering.

"The patients seem enthused by this program," said Twesme. "I hear regularly about how happy they are that this is working for them."

"It has taken two years to develop the program to where Mark feels more than one student might be needed to take care of the patient population that is in need," said Goering. "The program was recently presented to all of the physicians at Stevens Community Medical Center at a Clinic Oversight meeting and the referrals from other physicians have increased."

Twesme is also experiencing some of the down side of becoming a physician: "I've learned to give bad news, too for example, to patients who don't qualify for the low-cost," although he adds that he knows, as a doctor, there will be worse news that he may have to give to his future patients.

Looking forward to graduation from UMM in May, Twesme is on the waiting list at the University of Wisconsin Medical School. He will graduate from UMM with high distinction as a Scholar of the College. Another UMM student, Katie Lampi, is already in line to assume the PAL role when Twesme leaves.

Twesme credits his UMM experience with helping him to secure his PAL opportunity.

"I wouldn't have had the exact opportunity at a larger school," he said. "We may not have found a physician (like Dr. Zapetero) who would have looked into this type of program." In addition, added Twesme, "I don't think an adviser (like Carpenter) would have talked to the doctor and then asked every one of her advisees if they'd be interested (in being a PAL)," said Twesme.

"My patients and I have very much appreciated Mark's efforts over the past two years," said Goering. " I feel he has shown dedication and compassion toward these patients. I think he has matured through this project and that he will be an excellent physician."

For more information about PAL services, contact the Stevens Community Medical Center or your personal physician.

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