OP-ED: WASHINGTON STATE NEEDS THIRD MEDICAL SCHOOL

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Contact: Ryan Rodruck
Tel: 509-249-7861
Email: rrodruck@pnwu.edu

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Washington State Needs Third Medical School

By Dr. Keith Watson

The State of Washington needs another publicly funded medical school. The current law that provides for only one publicly funded medical school should be changed.

There are already two medical schools in the state - Seattle's University of Washington Medicine (publicly funded) and Yakima's Pacific Northwest University of Health Sciences - College of Osteopathic Medicine (privately funded). These two institutions alone simply cannot produce enough primary care physicians to both alleviate the existing shortages and replace those physicians retiring from practice in the coming years.

Pacific Northwest University's College of Osteopathic Medicine is routinely overlooked in the discussion about the need for more medical schools in Washington State. The college was established in 2005 and graduated its first class in 2012. It has a present class size of 140 students. Almost fifty percent of these students are from Washington with the remaining predominately from surrounding Northwest states. From the first class, thirty-five graduates are establishing primary care practices in Washington this summer. The College of Osteopathic Medicine will graduate its fourth class on May 9, for a total of 285 alumni. All of this production is from a young, privately funded medical school.

The state should recognize that the UW and WWAMI model cannot supply the numbers of physicians needed to address the shortage. Our present supply of practicing physicians are predominately west of the Cascades and are a mixture of fifteen percent UW graduates and eighty-five percent imported from other medical schools. Only seventeen percent of UW graduates select family medicine for residency training. The WWAMI program has been in existence over forty years, but this training model has been unable to either alleviate the physician shortage or keep sufficient graduates in state to practice.

Funding for medical student education is critical to address this shortfall. Many state funded medical schools have large costs associated with running and maintaining an academic medical
center. It is often confusing to separate the actual costs of student education from those required to maintain the trappings of a large research institution and its hospital services. On the other hand, community based education models, like Pacific Northwest University, tend to use existing hospitals and clinic structures to deliver real-world practice experiences for medical students. Most osteopathic (DO degree) and many of the newer allopathic schools (MD degree) are based on this model and consequentially have lower costs of operation.

Washington State University has proposed a medical school with this community-based model. The current statute should be changed to allow that to occur. To simply expand UW and WWAMI with its costly budgets is to add state dollars to a system whose outcomes are good but clearly insufficient. Furthermore, to deny WSU funding based on fears that another medical school will require the large budgets that UW Medicine demands is to act illogically.

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About the Author: Dr. Keith Watson is President of Pacific Northwest University of Health Sciences (PNWU) in Yakima, Washington. Prior to his service as President of PNWU, Dr. Watson served at Ohio University Heritage College of Osteopathic Medicine in the role of Senior Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and was the Chief Academic Officer for the Centers for Osteopathic Research and Education - an entity overseeing 90 Graduate Medical Education programs in 26 training institutions. He has served as residency inspector for the American College of Osteopathic Surgeons and as an inspector for the AOA Council on Osteopathic College of Accreditation. Dr. Watson received his doctorate in Osteopathic Medicine from the Texas College of Osteopathic Medicine in 1975. From 1981-1982, Dr. Watson completed a fellowship in surgical oncology at MD Anderson Hospital in Houston, Texas. He has been member of the American College of Osteopathic Surgeons since 1980.

About PNWU: In 2004, physicians and community leaders raised the awareness and resources to build a health sciences university where the next generation of osteopathic physicians would train. Located in Yakima, Washington, Pacific Northwest University of Health Sciences welcomed its first class of 70 medical school students into the College of Osteopathic Medicine in 2008 and graduated them in 2012. Today the University houses 300 medical students who are training under the careful instruction of highly-qualified faculty. In addition to the Yakima campus, PNWU has established 18 core rotation sites in communities around the Pacific Northwest. Hospitals and clinics around the region have welcomed PNWU students, training them in the clinical settings where they will eventually practice.

Contact Info:
Ryan Rodruck
rrodruck@pnwu.edu
509-249-7861