



Jim Lytle

Dr. Richard Holmes, second from left, a staff physician with Mississippi State University's student health center, explains human physiology to Erin Newman, Josh Roark and Bonnie Carew, who is the Extension rural health program leader and Rural Medical Scholars director. Biological engineering students Roark and Newman, who are graduates of the Rural Medical Scholars Program, plan to enroll in medical school after graduating from MSU.

### By Chance McDavid

A program in Mississippi helps high school students answer the question, "Do I want to be a doctor?"

Rural Medical Scholars is a five-week summer program at Mississippi State University offered through the Mississippi Rural Health Corps that gives eligible students an opportunity to gain hands-on experience in medicine. Except for a small registration fee, scholars receive free tuition, textbooks, housing and a food allowance.

The program is a partnership between MSU's Extension Service and the state's 15 community and junior colleges. It allows participants to earn seven hours of college credit, spend time with physicians in clinical settings and tour the University of Mississippi Medical Center. Study skills workshops, social activities and dormitory living make for a balanced college experience for the scholars.

To help recruit applicants, community and junior colleges promote the program to high schools in their districts. Students must have a composite ACT score of at least 25, earn above average grades and be ready to enter their senior year to be eligible to apply for the program.

# Rural Medical Scholars:

## A Prescription for Success

To date, 194 scholars have finished the program that began in 1998. Fifteen of these scholars are now in medical school. Many others have chosen other health-care careers such as nursing, veterinary medicine or physical therapy.

"These numbers are evidence of the success of the RMS program," said Bonnie Carew, Extension rural health program leader and RMS director. "We are helping some of the best students in our state decide on careers in medicine."

Mississippi's health care system is facing serious challenges and desperately needs to attract young people into medical careers.

"High rates of chronic illness, difficulties in access to services and higher health-care costs continue to take a toll on our health-care system," said Ann Sansing, Extension community health coordinator and RMS assistant director. "Encouraging students to become doctors who practice medicine in Mississippi is important to the overall quality of our health-care system."

Sansing said the difficulties in accessing health-care services can be attributed to Mississippi's shortage of doctors and other health-care providers. The national physician rate is 281 doctors per 100,000 people, while Mississippi's rate is only 182 physicians per 100,000 people.

"More people in Mississippi, per capita, develop potentially fatal diseases than elsewhere in the country," Carew said. "And when they do get sick, it's more difficult for them to secure the care they need."

Josh Roark of Biloxi is a senior biological engineering major at MSU who served as a RMS counselor for the 2006 class. He graduated from the program in 2002 and attributes his participation in RMS to his decision to apply to medical school.

"The combination of job shadowing experience and the



Kayla Hauss looks through a microscope as Hope Cruse, center, and Whitney Owens prepare to dissect a worm during a lab at the Rural Medical Scholars Program. While enrolled in the five-week 2006 summer program at Mississippi State University, 26 high school students with plans for health-care careers took premedicine courses and shadowed physicians.

Bob Ratliff

chance to earn college credit at the same time was very beneficial," he said. "I was a little hesitant at first to give up my summer, but the experience was certainly worth it."

Lindsay Lankford from Long Beach also served as a counselor in 2006. She is a senior biology major at the Mississippi University for Women and a former RMS graduate.

"I have been interested in attending medical school for a long time," she said. "RMS is a unique experience that helped me get on the right track to achieving my goal."

Members of the 2006 class offered a variety of reasons why the RMS experience was beneficial to them. Although some were considering becoming doctors before participating in RMS, they all agreed that the program was a big influence in their decision to pursue medical careers.

Grenada scholar E.J. Juckheim enjoyed the time spent with physi-

cians. "I really liked listening to the head of admissions at UMC and learning the requirements necessary to get into medical school," he said. "The chance to go out and watch physicians practice medicine was very helpful."

Sansing said as more and more RMS scholars graduate from medical school or pursue other health-care careers, the students and the state of Mississippi will benefit.

"The RMS program is a summer to remember, offering experiences to grow socially and mentally along with the opportunity to experience the day-to-day practice of medicine," Sansing said. "Scholars form lasting relationships that will benefit them for many years to come as they pursue their dreams of becoming physicians."