ECU, Cigna reach deal

A month ago ECU and Cigna broke off a yearlong round of negotiations.

City employees can breathe a little easier now that their medical insurance provider has reached an agreement with university doctors.

East Carolina University physicians will accept Cigna insurance under an agreement announced Tuesday.

University and Cigna negotiators have approved a new contract, meaning approximately 5,400 ECU Physicians patients can see their current doctors without paying out-of-network charges, according to an ECU release.

The accord came a month after ECU and Cigna broke off a yearlong round of negotiations.

Under the impasse, the Cigna network was to exclude ECU doctors starting Dec. 31.

The new deal, terms of which were unavailable late Tuesday, will cover patients treated while no contract was in place, according to the news release.

The new deal benefits city of Greenville and Greenville Utilities employees.

Cigna provides insurance to roughly 1,300 people who work for the two agencies. A "good number," but not a majority, of those employees are ECU Physicians patients, City Manager Wayne Bowers said in December.

The Brody School of Medicine has coverage agreements with 18 insurers, according to the ECU Web page.

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina is the largest insurer working with ECU Physicians, accounting for roughly 15 percent of ECU's clinical revenue.

The Cigna contract provides less than 5 percent of patient revenue, said Dr. Nick Benson, senior associate dean of the medical school and interim medical director of ECU Physicians, in December.

Cigna patients will receive information about the new agreement, according to the news release.

QUICK FACTS

About ECU Physicians:
- Practices: 24
- Physicians: 277
- 2006-07 revenue: $132 million

Source: ECU
Noted psychiatrist to help UNC-CH start forensic field

BY JEAN P. FISHER
STAFF WRITER

A nationally prominent forensic psychiatrist who evaluated "Unabomber" Ted Kaczynski and would-be presidential assassin John Hinckley has been recruited to help establish a new forensic psychiatry program at UNC-Chapel Hill.

Dr. Sally C. Johnson, who profiled famous prisoners while serving as chief psychiatrist and associate warden of health services at the Federal Correctional Institute in Butner, will be one of two forensic psychiatrists on the new program's three-person faculty.

The program will provide a range of criminal and civil services, such as determining the capacity of defendants in criminal cases to stand trial or establishing the ability of individuals to make decisions about medical care or personal finances. It also will conduct research. One study under way is looking at how laws in all 50 states define juvenile sex offenses, with an aim of highlighting the challenges in applying such laws.

"It's pretty broad sweep," Johnson, a clinical professor of psychiatry at UNC-Chapel Hill, said of the new program.

The UNC-CH program will be the only one of its kind in the state that is based on the campus of a research university. Currently, forensic evaluations are done by psychiatrists and psychologists in private practice, or by those working for the state's mental hospitals.

Eric Elbogen, a UNC-CH forensic psychologist on the new

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program's faculty, said he and his colleagues will serve needs that aren't being met today.

For example, North Carolina is one of the top retirement states, with a substantial elder population that is drawing up wills and other end-of-life documents, he said. Attorneys could "protect their clients' last wishes and stave off challenges by heirs if they were able to get an opinion confirming that the client was of sound mind when preparing their will.

"A lot of attorneys don't even know that's available, and we are right on the cusp of it becoming a big need," Elbogen said.

Another area that the UNC-CH program might serve is in providing evaluations of college and university students or staff who appear unstable. Such evaluations are in greater demand in the wake of the shooting last spring at Virginia Tech University, which left 33 dead.

"I think that's a growing area where we can be helpful," said Dr. Alyson Kuroski-Mazzeti, the UNC-Chapel Hill program's third faculty member.

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Freshmen SAT scores fall at N.C. Central; retention improves

BY ERIC FERRERI
STAFF WRITER

DURHAM — The average SAT score for freshmen at N.C. Central University last fall was 842 — an 18-point drop from the prior year and the largest decrease among UNC-system campuses.

NCCU was one of seven UNC campuses where average SAT scores declined in 2007. It is a campus in a furious battle to retain students, pouring resources into programs aimed at getting under-prepared freshmen onto campus, up to speed and back for their sophomore years.

"A drop of 18 points — we don’t feel that is a tremendous drop — but we would like to keep our scores up," Provost Beverly Washington Jones said.

Just two other UNC-system schools saw double-digit SAT declines. Scores dropped 16 points at Winston-Salem State and 11 points at Fayetteville State, and scores rose at seven others.

At two, UNC-Charlotte and Western Carolina, the average SAT score remained unchanged from 2006 to 2007.

Of the state’s five public historically black universities, North Carolina A&T’s freshmen scored best — 888. Winston-Salem State’s SAT average was 876; the averages at Fayetteville State and Elizabeth City State were both 846.

At UNC-Chapel Hill, the average topped 1300 for the first time, hitting 1302.

NCCU’s average SAT score was only lower once in the last decade — 834 in 2003. Still, Jones points to new retention data to indicate that improvements are in the offing. About 76 percent of freshmen who enrolled in fall 2006 returned this past fall, up six percentage points from the previous year.

"That’s very good," she said. "But we’d like to see how those students do academically and how many we retain."

Jones cites initiatives such as NCCU’s Aspiring Eagles program for that improvement. NCCU now requires that applicants with high school grade point averages below 2.5 or SAT scores below 680 successfully complete the summer program before enrolling as official NCCU university freshmen. It is an acknowledgement that some students arrive on campus without the proper math, reading, writing and test-taking skills.

Late last year, UNC system officials began floating the idea of tougher admissions standards. Though there is no clear proposal yet, one idea under consideration would raise the minimum grade point average for high school students who want to go to a UNC campus. It’s unclear what that threshold would be, but data show that students who enter UNC campuses with a high school grade point average below a C don’t fare well, with only 85 percent earning a diploma within six years.

College administrators routinely insist the SAT score is just one of a variety of factors considered by admissions departments when evaluating applicants, but it does play a role. At NCCU and across the UNC system, plans are in place to ratchet up SAT minimums. At NCCU next fall, most students must have a 720 SAT score and a 2.3 grade point average to be considered for admission, and the SAT minimum will be higher for the nursing program and other science disciplines.

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