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Physicians outline objectives for ECU

Overarching goals include creating a family and patient-centered practice, attracting and retaining a skilled and diverse clinical staff, official says.

BY TOM MARINE
The Daily Reflector

The strategic goals of ECU Physicians must revolve around the patients, people, programs and practice at the Brody School of Medicine, Dr. Michael Rotondo said Wednesday at the ECU Board of Trustees Health Sciences Committee meeting.

Rotondo, professor and chairman of the department of surgery at the Brody School, presented the ECU Physicians strategic plan, including its vision and mission statements as well as its core principles.

He said the overarching objectives are to create a family and patient-centered practice, attract and retain a skilled and diverse clinical staff, build programs based on the core strengths and develop a practice that remains dominant in the health-care market.

Moving forward, Rotondo said, the next step is tactical development of the execution of this plan.

That won't be easy, said Dr. Paul Cunningham, dean of the Brody school and senior associate vice chancellor for medical affairs. It will require an extended period of time and hard work.

"This is not a business where we can just stop the assembly line, change the business structure, and restart it," he said. "We must continue to support our safety net services while we do this."

Attending the start of the meeting was Dr. James R. Hupp, the founding dean of ECU's new dental school.

Hupp, who officially assumed his duties next week, said it is a dream come true to help create a new institution. He said he anticipates success that will stay true to vision of the health sciences division and the university.

Brian Jowers, executive director of ECU Physicians, gave a budget update to the

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committee members, noting the financial performance continues to improve compared to recent years.

ECU Physicians earned $11.2 million during September in operating revenue while spending $11.3 million on operating expenses for a net loss of $100,000, according to the executive summary of his presentation.

To this point in its fiscal year, ECU Physicians has experienced a net loss of $2.4 million, which is more than $2 million better than last year.

Jowers said he would like to see the health organization increase its cash reserves to about $60 million to pay for future programs.

As for balancing the budget, he said, they need to find the balance between growing services and cutting costs at the medical school.

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21-year study of children and health set to begin in January

By KATE MURPHY
New York Times News Service

Thursday, October 30, 2008

After nearly a decade of planning, researchers will begin recruiting pregnant women in January for an ambitious nationwide study that will follow more than 100,000 children from before birth until age 21.

The goal of the federally financed project, the National Children's Study, is to gain a better understanding of the effects of a wide array of factors on children's health.

"What we are doing is bold and needs to be bold in order to answer some pressing questions," said the study's director, Dr. Peter C. Scheidt, a pediatrician on the staff of the child-health division of the National Institutes of Health.

Investigators hope to find explanations for the rising rates of premature births, childhood obesity, cancer, autism, endocrine disorders and behavioral problems. To that end, they will examine factors like genetics and child rearing, geography, exposure to chemicals, nutrition and pollution.

While few quarrel with the goal, some experts worry that the expansive project will take resources away from smaller and more focused perinatal and pediatric research, particularly when budgets are certain to be strained by the financial crisis. The cost is estimated to be $110 million to $130 million a year, for a total of about $2.7 billion.

Participating mothers and children (fathers will be encouraged but not required to take part) will be given periodic interviews and questionnaires. They will further be asked to submit samples of blood, urine and hair. Air, water and dust from their environments will also be sampled and tested.

"Something like this has never been done in this country," said a principal investigator for the study, Dr. Philip J. Landrigan, professor and chairman of community and preventive medicine at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in Manhattan. "It's past time for us to do this."

Studies of comparable size and scope are under way in Britain, Denmark and Norway.

Conceived during the Clinton administration and authorized by the Children's Health Act of 2000, the National Children's Study is being led by a group of federal agencies. Besides the health institutes, they are the Department of Health and Human Services, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Education.

Since 2000, more than 2,400 health care, environmental and technology professionals have met in panels for hundreds of hours to work out such details as sampling methodology, data collection and privacy protection.

Subjects will be chosen from 105 counties to achieve a representative mix of racial, ethnic, religious, social, cultural and geographic characteristics. Forty regional centers will administer the study — mostly well-known medical institutions like Mount Sinai, the University of North Carolina School of Medicine and the University of Texas Health Science Center-Houston.

Dr. Russ Hauser, a professor of environmental and occupational epidemiology at the Harvard School of Public Health who served on a National Academy of Sciences committee that reviewed the study's design, said the study would be "worthy and feasible" as long as it was properly financed.

But other experts questioned whether it was worth the cost. "The question isn't whether the goals can be
accomplished," said Dr. Arthur Reingold professor of epidemiology at the School of Public Health at the University of California, Berkeley. "It's more a question of is this the best use of almost $3 billion, particularly when it will inevitably take funding from other research, especially with the economy falling to pieces."

Researchers involved in the children's study counter that it will more than pay for itself by leading researchers to the causes or contributing factors for so many childhood disorders. Landrigan said a "dress rehearsal" of the study, which began in 2001 with 1,500 subjects drawn from New York and California, has already shown that pregnant women exposed to organophosphates in pesticides were more likely to have babies with small brains and impaired cognition.

Another concern is that the study's advisory board — which is choosing the chemical exposures to be studied — includes scientists from 3M and Pfizer, who have apparent conflicts of interest.

But Richard Wiles, executive director of the nonprofit Environmental Working Group, said only two such scientists were among the board's 33 members.

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NEWSPAPERS
Forecast: tuition hikes, decline in aid

By Steve Hendrix
The Washington Post

Washington — College students and their parents should brace for sharp tuition hikes and declining financial aid as the widening economic downturn begins to hit campuses across the country, higher education officials and analysts said Wednesday.

The warnings came in response to the College Board's annual survey of tuition and fees, which showed relatively modest increases in the cost for the 2008-2009 academic year, with costs rising 1 percent to 3 percent above inflation. But the report was based on data collected before June and does not reflect the economic issues now embroiling the nation.

The report found tuition for the year climbed 6.4 percent for in-state students at public four-year institutions to an average cost of $6,585. Private colleges jumped 5.9 percent to an average of $25,143. The cost of attending community colleges declined, after adjusting for inflation, by 0.8 percent to $2,300 for the year.

But with the economic downturn, the American Council on Education, a coalition of more than 1,600 college and university presidents, warned that conditions are increasingly ripe for some of the biggest tuition jumps in more than a decade. State governments, struggling to balance budgets at a time of plummeting tax revenue, are beginning to slash appropriations to post-secondary institutions. Private schools are seeing their endowments wither in the stock market, and donors are growing more cautious with their giving.