Rural Kansas in need of pharmacists

KU wants to expand pharmacy school to alleviate problem

By SARAH KESSINGER
Harris News Service

TOPEKA — There’s satisfaction in the voice of Salina pharmacist Jeff Denton when he tells of a former pharmacy student who once trained at his business.

After graduation from the University of Kansas School of Pharmacy, she moved to Osborne with plans to purchase the local drug store.

“That community’s going to be well served,” Denton said.

But such situations are rare, says the longtime owner of B&K Prescription Shop, 601 E. Iron.

“Our biggest problem is finding people to come out to rural Kansas and work.”

While Salina’s got an adequate supply of pharmacists, Denton said, there are communities within a 50-mile radius without a one.

Much of rural Kansas today faces the challenge of looking for physicians, dentists and, increasingly, pharmacists.

Seven counties across the state have no drug stores and 32 have just one. With retirement age approaching for many rural pharmacists, that shortage will be compounded unless things change, said the dean of KU’s pharmacy school, Ken Audus.

Trying to get a handle on the decline, the school is seeking nearly $50 million in new state funds to expand its facilities in Lawrence and add a satellite location in Wichita.

Right now, KU’s six-year program graduates 105 students each year. It isn’t enough to fill the rural void, Audus said, hoping to add some 45 more slots in Lawrence and 40 more at the medical school’s teaching site in Wichita.

With additional space, the school could perhaps start to marshal the forces needed to keep small-town pharmacies going and help maintain communities as attractive places to live.

“If people have to not only drive to get medicine, but to get advice and recommendations on how to use it safely, it’s a real inconvenience,” Denton notes. “People do use pharmacists for health information as much as doctors sometimes.”

“It’s a very real dilemma,” agreed Rep. Don Hill, R-Emporia, a pharmacist and owner of two local Medicine Shoppe franchises.

Even in Emporia, Hill knows of at least three vacancies at local drug stores and the hospital.

The state Board of Regents, which oversees state universities, soon will consider whether to send a request to the 2008 Legislature, which convenes in January for state funds to expand the state’s only pharmacy school.

Advocates hope to combine private fundraising, tuition and state tax revenues for the project. Along with the expansion, they hope to sell small-town living to more students, who nowadays often tend toward urban jobs.

Audus said the school takes students on tours of the state’s various regions, including rural towns. They also promote a program that places students with professional pharmacists during two summers of their studies.
KU seeks funds to train more pharmacists

School hopes to nearly double the 105 students who graduate its pharmacy program each year.

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See KU / A7

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

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Neighboring Chase and Wabaunsee counties have no pharmacy, Hill said. Nearby Greenwood County just watched one close, leaving only one left.

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Both Denton and Audus say there is something special about owners of small-town drug stores.

“They have a certain standing in the community,” Audus said.

“A lot of pharmacists out here are in towns where you’re not dealing with customers, you’re dealing with your neighbors and that’s a different type of situation,” Denton said.

“That takes a special type of person to do that.”

Audus said the school takes students on tours of the state’s various regions, including rural towns. They also promote a program that places students with professional pharmacists during two summers of their studies.

Those who go to rural communities “have their eyes opened,” said Audus, a former “drug store rat” himself, who spent his high school years stocking shelves for his hometown pharmacist.

“They get a little different view of what goes on in small towns, the very nice living conditions, a good place to raise a family. That gives them a little different feeling rather than just reading about it or hearing about it.”

Audus said the school’s expansion is critical to continuing that work.

“We turn away 335 students per year,” he said. “The most difficult letters I have to write are those saying, ‘You’re fully qualified but we don’t have the space.’”