Educating those caring for Nevada’s elders

by DEAN SCHEMERHORN, APR

We have a shortage of health care professionals, so educating all of those professionals on matters affecting the elderly and keeping them current on pertinent information is important.

— GERALD ACKERMAN, assistant dean, rural programs and director, Office of Rural Health at the University of Nevada, Reno School of Medicine
To seek a closer alignment of missions and to complement resources, the Nevada Geriatric Education Center (NGEC) came under the direction of the Sanford Center for Aging in July, having previously been under the auspices of the Office of Statewide Initiatives at the University of Nevada, Reno School of Medicine.

“The education, information and resources that the NGEC provides to health care professionals is a perfect complement to the Sanford Center’s mission to enhance the quality of life and well-being for elders through education, research and community outreach,” said Peter Reed, director of the Sanford Center for Aging. “Working together, we will have a tremendous impact on the services elders receive in the state of Nevada, as well as on the providers who deliver those services.”

A mission to educate geriatric care providers

Patti Swager, NGEC director, explained that her organization’s mission is to improve healthcare delivered to older adults by providing education, information and resources to health care professionals and faculty.

To complete its mission, the NGEC provides a variety of programs that:

- Promote curriculum development by identifying educational needs in the field of geriatric care
- Offer continuing education to meet the needs of health care professionals through conferences, lectures and workshops
- Address the needs of rural practitioners via interactive video
- Partner with community agencies and clinics to identify potential training sites for health care students

Gerald Ackerman, assistant dean, rural programs and director, Office of Rural Health at the University of Nevada, Reno School of Medicine, believes that the NGEC is invaluable in training health care professionals to meet the needs of the geriatric population, especially in the rural areas of the state.

“As our elderly population is growing, the role of the Nevada Geriatric Education Center becomes even more key,” said Ackerman. “We have a shortage of health care professionals, so educating all of those professionals on matters affecting the elderly and keeping them current on pertinent information is important.”

Filling the gaps in geriatric care

To develop and offer training for physicians, nurses and others providers, the NGEC works with current and future licensed health care professionals, University faculty and students in the health disciplines, as well as lay caregivers, who are an essential part of a health care team.

The NGEC team surveys geriatric care in the state to detect gaps in services. When a gap is identified, the staff works with experts in the field to develop a curriculum for health care professionals that addresses the gap, and then arranges locations for trainings to be held. These trainings offer continuing education credits that providers may use to maintain their board certification.

Interorganizational partnerships are crucial to the NGEC’s success. For instance, the center has worked with the Cleveland Clinic to provide education about Alzheimer’s disease and to highlight the unique needs of Alzheimer’s patients and caregivers.

The NGEC also helps experienced health care professionals who are beginning to practice geriatric care to gain general education requirements, such as in community resources and ethics. Additionally, the center provides education specific to working with elders in a general practice, such as how to give advice to prevent falls. Its educational efforts also help people in state agencies maintain and improve their skills in serving elders.

Elder care in rural communities

To reach as many professionals as possible, the NGEC has offices in Reno and Las Vegas and provides training conferences in both locations, which rural health care providers can attend via teleconference. The center also provides a geriatric-focused clinic in partnership with the School of Medicine’s Project ECHO, which offers telehealth specialty care consultations to primary care providers in rural and underserved areas. In addition, the NGEC has a contract with Nevada’s Aging and Disability Services Division to bring live training to senior centers in Carson City, Elko, Pahrump and other rural communities.

At a rural health summit last year, Swager organized a special session on geriatrics for rural hospitals. That session covered topics from billing to the annual wellness check, for which all Medicare beneficiaries are eligible.

Rural health care providers expressed their appreciation for the geriatric education received through the NGEC.

“Thank you for an excellent session,” said one participant. “Your material was very well organized and very informative. Your stories were interesting and brought home your points. I learned some principles which I can apply in caring for our residents.”

Another said: “This seminar will help

To learn more about supporting the Sanford Center for Aging, please contact Seema Donahoe ’02, director of development, at sdonahoe@unr.edu or (775) 682-7304.