LITTLE ROCK – A $1 million grant announced today to the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) College of Medicine from Arkansas Blue Cross and Blue Shield will go toward increasing the number of primary care physicians in the state.

The grant will create the Arkansas Blue Cross and Blue Shield Primary Care Scholarship, to be given to a junior or senior medical student in the UAMS College of Medicine. Scholarship recipients will be chosen from those planning to pursue postgraduate training in family medicine, general internal medicine or general pediatrics. The students also must intend to practice primary care in Arkansas, preferably in the more rural parts of the state.

“The shortage of primary care physicians is at a critical point in this country,” said UAMS Chancellor Dan Rahn, M.D., “Primary care physicians are the first line of defense and the ones who promote preventive care, which in turn builds healthier communities and reduces health care costs. This is truly a noble and visionary gift by Arkansas Blue Cross, and it will greatly benefit Arkansas and the future of health care.”

Primary care is in critical condition, particularly in rural Arkansas. The main reasons for the crisis are:

- A shortage of primary care physicians, including family practice, pediatric and general internal medicine doctors.
- An aging population and an illness burden higher than the national average, which creates high patient volume for the physicians who are available.
- The potential projected influx of more than 251,000 Arkansans to the Medicaid program in 2014 under health care reform.

“We know changes need to take place in the health care environment in order to provide the quality of care Arkansans deserve,” said Mark White, president and chief executive
officer of Arkansas Blue Cross. “Instead of reacting to these changes, we want to be in the forefront, helping to mold the future of health care in Arkansas. We believe that by encouraging medical students today to go into primary care, our members will have the care they need to live healthier lives in the future.”

The scholarship, given in honor of the Board of Directors of Arkansas Blue Cross, will be awarded each year, beginning with the 2012-2013 academic year. It is estimated that about $40,000 will be available each year for the scholarship, using interest accrued from the grant.

According to the Arkansas Department of Health, in 2008 the majority of the state met the definition of “medically underserved,” with one primary care physician available for every 3,000 people. That same year, the Healthy Workforce in Arkansas study by the UAMS Center for Rural Health indicated that there were almost 1,000 vacancies for PCPs in the state. Instead of improving, these trends are steadily worsening.

A big reason for the shortage of primary care physicians is the high cost of medical school. The Association of American Medical Colleges estimates that the average medical student ends up $125,000 in debt by graduation.

“It is on the lower end here in Arkansas, but there is still an enormous amount of debt staring most of them in the face when they look toward graduation,” said College of Medicine Dean Debra Fiser, M.D. Many medical students, she said, assume that it makes sense to go into a field of study where they can pay off the loans quickly, and that steers them toward specializing and away from primary care.

“Even for students who want to go into primary care, there is a mindset that they would never be able to earn enough to pay off their debt,” she said.

According to the Johns Hopkins Primary Care Policy Center, adults in the United States who had a primary care physician had 33 percent lower costs of care and were 19 percent less likely to die prematurely from their conditions than those who had received care from a specialist, after adjusting for demographic and health characteristics. The center found that the availability of primary care physicians is consistently associated with improved health outcomes for conditions like cancer, heart disease, stroke, infant mortality, low birth weight, life expectancy and self-managed care.

Founded in 1948, Arkansas Blue Cross and Blue Shield, an Independent Licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association, is the largest health insurer in Arkansas. Arkansas Blue Cross and its affiliates have more than 2,700 employees. If combined, the 39 independent, locally operated Blue Cross and Blue Shield Plans collectively provide healthcare coverage for 98 million — nearly one in three — Americans. For more information, visit arkansasbluecross.com.

UAMS is the state’s only comprehensive academic health center, with colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Related Professions and Public Health; a graduate school; a 540,000-square-foot hospital; a statewide network of regional centers; and six --more--
institutes: the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, the Jackson T. Stephens Spine & Neurosciences Institute, the Myeloma Institute for Research and Therapy, the Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute, the Psychiatric Research Institute and the Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging. It is the only adult Level 1 trauma center in the state. UAMS has 2,836 students and 761 medical residents. It is the state’s largest public employer with more than 10,000 employees, including nearly 1,150 physicians who provide medical care to patients at UAMS, Arkansas Children’s Hospital, the VA Medical Center and UAMS’ Area Health Education Centers throughout the state. Visit www.uams.edu or www.uamshealth.com.

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