On any given day at clinical affiliate Danbury Hospital, clerkship students from the UVM College of Medicine generally agree: It can sometimes feel like the United Nations. When David Harari ’15 ticks off the number of different nationalities represented by his internal medicine team, he needs two hands to do it.

“India, Jamaica, Taiwan, Sri Lanka, Argentina, Sweden: It’s definitely an eclectic group around here,” he says. “There’s a freshness to the place; it’s nice to have that diversity.”

This cultural mix also leads to impromptu teaching moments, says Laurel Wickberg ’15. One day as she chatted with another student about malaria and sketched out sources for more information, a resident sitting nearby chimed in with first-hand information about symptoms and treatment options. The resident explained that she was from Nigeria and had battled the disease herself, as did members of her family.

“Malaria is a huge problem in many parts of the world,” Wickberg says. “We were able to learn more from someone who has seen it.”

The diverse Danbury community is one of four locations where College of Medicine students expand their experience practicing medicine — and interacting with patients. After completing the Foundations level of the Vermont Integrated Curriculum, students enter the clinical clerkship level, comprising a series of six or seven-week long rotations at the clinical sites: Family Medicine, Inpatient Internal Medicine, Outpatient Family Medicine, and Community Medicine.

UVM medical student Michael Ma ’15 listens to a patient at Seifert & Ford Family Community Health Center in Danbury during his outpatient medicine clerkship. With him is Assistant Professor of Medicine Dino Messina, M.D.
“Greater Danbury is a melting pot of many cultures and socio-economic backgrounds,” says John M. Murphy, M.D., president and CEO of the WCHN. “As a result, it is an extraordinary place to live, work and learn medicine. Our relationship with the University of Vermont promotes a prolific learning environment for students and clinical staff that will continue to serve the diverse needs of our community in important and innovative ways.”

“UVM is a top-notch medical school,” says Ramin Ahmadzadeh, M.D., M.P.H., chair of the Department of Medical Education and Research at Danbury Hospital/WCHN, noting in particular the “quality of the curriculum and quality of students,” as well as the College’s commitment to primary care and leading-edge research. Designation of a branch campus involves layers of careful planning and review and accreditation by the Liaison Committee on Medical Education (LCME), but the process is moving forward.

An 8,000-square-foot clinical simulation lab — designed by the same architect who created the UVM/Fletcher Allen sim lab, opened this spring at Danbury. The hospital is also creating a standardized patient program, again modeled after the UVM on-campus program that has been part of the medical curriculum for the last decade.

The goal is “a seamless transfer of the educational experience,” Ahmadzadeh says. The global health program, spearheaded by Majid Sadigh, M.D., site director and an infectious disease specialist and director of global health at Danbury Hospital/WCHN, brings the two institutions into even closer collaboration.

At the foundation of all of these developments are the experiences students have while studying and working in Danbury.

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A DAY IN THE LIFE

The Soffert and Ford Family Community Health Clinic at 70 Main Street sits across the street from the Fairfield County Courthouse and next to the Old Fair/ i eld Health Clinic at 70 Main Street sits across A DAY IN THE LIFE Family Community Health Center in Danbury. have brought more life to the downtown and a growing immigrant community began to decline. Revitalization eff  orts prominence and the hat-making industry World War II, when the railroad lost the city went through tough times after “Hat Capital of the World” in the 1880s, dermatology and emergency medicine — are also part of the outpatient experience and give students exposure to a variety of specialties. In addition to outpatient/neurology, Ma completed his family medicine clerkship at Brookfield Family Medicine, a practice affiliated with Danbury Hospital located in a nearby town. “We saw pretty much everything,” he says. “It was the front lines.” Ma was also at the forefront of meeting local public health needs. Every Family Medicine clerkship student completes a community project in collaboration with a local agency or non-profit. Ma worked on a project focused on smoking cessation. Other students have worked on childhood obesity initiatives, diabetes education, and other outreach.

For Laurel Wickberg, ’15, her clerkship year has provided a chance to experience how different hospitals are managed. She’s spent several rotations in Danbury — including neurology/ outpatient, internal medicine and surgery — and through this extended time there has gotten to know more about the values inherent to the institution. This has been helpful as she starts to consider residency programs for pediatrics.

“It’s giving me insight into what I want from a program,” she says. “What does it look like when residents are happy?” Some insights may be less lofty, but equally useful. Soon after starting his internal medicine clerkship in Danbury, David Harari ’15 came to appreciate the importance of comfortable shoes. He often starts his day around 7 a.m., with his first task to check in on the two to three patients he is assigned. After Morning Report, he meets up with his team to start patient rounds, which may take anywhere from a few hours to the bulk of the day. The comfortable shoes become important here as the team — which includes several medical students, interns, and an attending physician — does much of its consulting walking down the hallway or gathered around the bed in a patient’s room. But it’s during this time that academic knowledge coalesces with clinical cases.

“Everything is team-based,” he says. “There are many ‘on-the-job’ teaching moments.” Sometimes this means looking up information, chiming in to answer questions, or presenting his patients to the team. And then there are other opportunities for learning, including EKG sessions, virtual conferences with UVM faculty in Burlington, and many other conferences and activities. His team is on call every fifth day, which means a longer day and admitting privileges. The pace for the six-week clerkship is brisk, but rewarding.

“The amount of teaching built into the program is intensive,” he says, “and it magnifies what we do when we see our patients. There’s a smooth transition between didactic and clinical.” And residents at Danbury are exceptional teachers and a welcoming presence, adds Wickberg.

“(Danbury residents) really accept us as part of the team and they make us feel at home,” she says. “That makes all the difference in the world.”

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— David Harari ’15

GLOBAL HEALTH & FUTURE COLLABORATIONS

During a recent global health presentation at Danbury Hospital, Tamar Goldberg ’15 had the chance to meet her future “family.” Visiting from Uganda were Sam Luboga, M.Med., Ph.D., and his wife, Christine, host family and mentors to UVM med students who visit there for a global health elective. Goldberg, in Danbury at the time for the obstetrics-gynecology clerkship, will be heading to Kampala, Uganda, during the 2014–15 academic year for a six-week elective. Majid Sadigh, M.D., introduced the three some at a break in the session.

“She is going to be your new daughter,” Sadigh laughed as the couple chatted with Goldberg at the front of the room. Goldberg and seven other College of Medicine students will be studying in Russia or Uganda in 2014–2015 through the global health program. Student interest has been high: 23 applications were received for the eight available student slots. First-year students are eligible for a summer research elective, while fourth-year students complete a six-week or longer elective that combines clinical work with optional research. Two slots are offered to faculty. Plane tickets, tuition, and accommodations are paid for by the program.

The opportunities literally span the globe: Sadigh has been building partnerships with sites including the Uganda Cancer Institute in Kampala; Kazan State Medical University in Kazan, Russia; Zimbabwe University College of Health Sciences in Harare, Zimbabwe, and Cho Ray Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. A partnership with Hospital PAP in Paraiso, Dominican Republic, is also in the works. Several medical students and one UVM faculty
Many College of Medicine students doing their family medicine clerkship in Danbury have become familiar with four numbers 5, 1, 0. These digits are at the core of a campaign to combat childhood obesity, one that students have played a key role in sharing with parents, kids, and the medical establishment in Danbury.

The goal of the community health improvement project — a requirement of the family medicine clerkship — is to immerse students in a real aspect of the local community while giving them experience on the front lines of public health. In the last few years about a dozen students have worked with the Regional YMCA of Western Connecticut for their community health project, says Maureen Farrell, director of community wellness, bringing energy, enthusiasm and the cause.

The message at the heart of the nationwide Y520 campaign is simple: five servings of fruits and vegetables, two hours or less of screen time, one hour or more of exercise, and zero sugar-sweetened drinks.

The Coalition for Healthy Kids, a group of 15 organizations in the Danbury area working on childhood obesity, adopted this message for their community, organizing physical fitness and education activities, as well as creating a brochure with the Y520 guidelines. Parents and caregivers looking for action items were one audience, Farrell says, but the coalition also wanted the “medical community to buy into this too.”

"Many families get health information from their doctors,” she says. “And we felt that the message needs to be face-to-face.”

Many students have helped out with additional efforts, translated into Spanish and Portuguese. Students have conducted surveys to gauge the effectiveness of the message, while others have helped out with additional childhood obesity-related projects. In the fall of 2013, Leah Ng ’15 presented information about the Y520 message at a physicians’ conference, part of a fitness assessment at area schools, and talked to parents about the Y520 message. He says he learned first-hand how complex the childhood obesity issues are, especially when parents are dealing with so many competing demands.

As a medical student, Ng says he was able to share his perspective on the importance of physical activity, using examples from his own life that show how being active actually helps his concentration and focus.

Wickberg and one of her roommates, Avanti Golikeri ’15, made it a habit at the end of the day to visit the Greenknoll branch of the YMCA — where all College of Medicine students receive a free membership, to run on the track or treadmill and play a game of racquetball. This same YMCA is a partner for a current student community health improvement project (see sidebar).

Enter the College of Medicine students. The first wave to partner with the YMCA and the Coalition for Healthy Kids in 2011 became the conduit to primary care physicians and pediatricians, not only distributing the brochures, but helping to educate physicians about the message. To date, over 4,000 brochures have gone out to pediatrics and family practice offices in the greater Danbury area. It has also been translated into Spanish and Portuguese. Students have conducted surveys to gauge the effectiveness of the message, while others have helped out with additional childhood obesity-related projects.

As Danbury Hospital and the UVM College of Medicine move toward branch campus designation, this spirit of collaboration is set to grow. Danbury and UVM will be working together to train and integrate clinical faculty and administrative leaders — including a campus dean, dean of students, financial aid officers and other key personnel — into the Danbury organization.

Among other benefits, branch campus designation and the new simulation lab — will give Danbury the ability to administer student assessments — now students must complete these requirements in Burlington at the end of each clerkship. It would also allow students to return to Danbury for clinical education. It may also lead to more students choosing to return to Danbury for their residencies, creating a situation where former College of Medicine students play an important role in teaching current students.

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In addition to an extensive orientation at the start of clerkship, and ongoing support from several key staff members, the living learning environments are integrated in several ways.

The students’ apartment complex is just minutes away from Danbury Hospital, and even closer to one of the clinics where students work. In the warmer months, the complex offers an outdoor swimming pool and a barbecue popular for evening and weekend get-togethers. Wickberg and one of her roommates, Avanti Golikeri ’15, make it a habit at the end of the day to visit the Greenknoll branch of the YMCA — where all College of Medicine students receive a free membership, to run on the track or treadmill and play a game of racquetball. This same YMCA is a partner for a current student community health improvement project (see sidebar).

Dinner together at home is also usually part of the evening for the two women; conversation can turn from ideas for future knitting projects to debating on the difficult order of the day. Although time outside of the hospital or the clinic is at a premium, Danbury’s proximity to New York City makes it easy to hop on a train, says Ma, who grew up in New York and appreciates the opportunities to visit.

For groceries and the odd diversion there’s the “Disneyland” of grocery stores, shoppers combine picking up food and other staples with stopping to watch animatronic characters.

“Their lives have been immersed in the culture in ways that are hard to replicate. They learn how their work as doctors fits into the larger whole, and come back with a new perspective on health and healthcare.”

As the connections between the two institutions continue to grow, Bertsch says the partnership is proving to be a chance to evolve in positive ways for both the UVM College of Medicine and Danbury Hospital.

“We’re better because of them and they’re better because of us,” she says. “We bring structure to the teaching program. They’ve brought to us the global health program and a diversity of clinical experiences for our students.”

And for students, it’s an opportunity to be part of a clerkship partnership imbued with energy and enthusiasm.

“It’s interesting to be involved at the beginning of something,” Wickberg says. “(The partnership) is so young — I’ll be excited to see what it brings.”

Above: Laura Wickberg ’15 (left) and her roommate Avanti Golikeri ’15 relax in their Danbury apartment a short distance away from the hospital. A typical evening finds them studying, knitting; and, while the kettle boils, hula hooping. Facing page: the students play racquetball at the nearby YMCA.