

A voice for kids

UF pediatric residents focus on advocacy

By April Frawley Birdwell

When a baby is born, new parents are bound to agonize over every question: How often should the baby dirty its diaper? What happens if the baby bleeds when the umbilical cord falls off? What is considered a fever in a baby? The list could go on.

But while these common questions are important, they're not necessarily concerns that justify rushing a baby to the emergency room. To help answer common questions parents have, a group of UF pediatric residents put together a small brochure, which was passed out at UF pediatrics clinics. Last year, then third-year pediatrics resident Sara Slovin, M.D., took parent education a step further, teaming up with a community group for new moms to offer the class "Babies Don't Come With Instructions." Basically, Newborn 101.

"It was to improve parents' knowledge base about normal newborn care and improve their comfort level," said Slovin, who finished her residency in July and is now a fellow at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

For pediatric residents, teaching parents is just one facet of an important role they are learning to play as pediatricians — patient advocate. While most doctors and specialists are advocates for their patients, the role of advocacy in pediatrics is even more pronounced, says Michele Lossius, M.D., a UF assistant professor of pediatrics. Why? Children are too young to vote for policies that affect them and cannot advocate for themselves.

"As pediatricians, we are constantly doing advocacy," Lossius said. "You're affecting each child who comes in your office, but you're also trying to create local awareness and health change."

To better prepare residents to advocate for patients, UF pediatric residents in Gainesville spend one month during their second year in an advocacy rotation. During this time, the residents work on projects they are passionate about — for Slovin it was the newborn class — as well as visit legislators in Tallahassee and learn about local issues that affect their patients. Each year, at least two residents also get the opportunity to attend a legislative day in Washington, D.C., sponsored by

the American Academy of Pediatrics. Jacksonville pediatric residents are also extensively involved in advocacy work.

"Because kids don't vote, politicians who decide where the money goes don't always worry about them," said Jay Roberson, M.D., a third-year resident who attended the AAP Legislative Conference in April with fellow resident Karen Bodnar, M.D. "They should. (Children) are the future of the country and world but they get thrown on the backburner by a lot of larger groups, even by some hospitals and health-care systems because they are not necessarily a profitable sector as far as inpatient medicine goes."

In recent years, pediatric residents have worked with the Florida chapter of the AAP to advocate for more stringent safety belt laws, have helped organize UF's first Sports Medicine Jamboree to educate young athletes and have stood outside in the rain to protest the possible veto of extending funding for the state's Children's Health Insurance Plan. And this is just a taste of their involvement.

Last year, Lossius, who oversees the advocacy rotation and is a graduate of UF's pediatric residency, added a new component to the program to beef up the advocacy residents do during their time here. Instead of only working on a project during their monthlong rotation, residents now start a long-term project in their first year.

But it doesn't always take a giant project for residents to make a difference. Writing letters to the editor and taking the time to call a congressman to voice an opinion on a health-care bill that affects children can effect change, too.

"It can be little tiny things, like fliers to parents or calling to give an opinion on legislation," Roberson said. "It takes minutes and ultimately makes a huge difference."

Although she's no longer a UF resident, Slovin still thinks about "Babies Don't Come with Instructions." The newborn class has since transitioned into the hospital, which Slovin says is a better location for moms.

"A lot of residents may not realize the impact they can have on their community," said Slovin, who plans to stay in community pediatrics and continue her advocacy work. "This advocacy rotation gives residents the opportunity to develop skills and tools to take with them when they practice so they can advocate for their own patients and teach parents how to advocate for their children." ☐



PHOTO BY APRIL FRAWLEY BIRDWELL

UF pediatrics residents spend a month in an advocacy rotation, overseen by Dr. Michele Lossius (center). Two residents each year also get the chance to attend a national AAP legislative conference, a major advocacy event. Residents Dr. Jay Roberson (right) and Dr. Karen Bodnar (left) attended this year.



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