FORT offers students in-depth clinical, research experience

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Surgical oncologist Steven D. Trocha steps into an operating room at Greenville Memorial Hospital, preparing to perform a mastectomy on a patient with breast cancer. There to observe are three students.

While Trocha works, he peppers the students with questions and grills them on the intricacies of the procedure. And he shows them what an effective and efficient operating room is all about.

This situation is hardly unusual for a teaching hospital. What is unusual, however, is who has scrubbed in to observe Trocha’s work. One is a medical student. Another is a surgical resident.

The third is Furman student Sarah Asman ‘08. “Never in a million years did I expect an opportunity like this as an undergrad, even at Furman,” Asman says. “This is the real deal.”

Asman, a biology major, was one of 10 undergraduates who were part of the 2007 Furman Oncology Research Team (FORT), a summer internship program that offered students the chance to conduct cancer research and gain the kind of practical know-how that could set them apart in the eyes of medical schools and graduate programs.

“It was amazing how quickly they assimilated the information from the medical textbooks, journal articles and other areas,” says Schammel.

To date, the FORT students have submitted four research abstracts for consideration at national and international meetings. So far, one (on melanoma, by Amanda Byrd ‘08) has been accepted for a meeting in Sydney, Australia, which Byrd will attend.

Thanks to the high-quality work of the students, Schammel has heard from other doctors who want to institute similar programs with undergraduates. “So the students aren’t the only ones getting value out of this,” says Schammel. “You have really busy clinicians who need to publish — who have a lot of research to do — and this is a great collaborative effort that assists them in this endeavor.”

As for the students, they recognize they’ve been given an opportunity that is rarely available at the undergraduate level. Fifteen more have signed up for the program this summer.

“We’ve gotten it all through this experience,” says Kaylee Nuckolls ‘08. “We’ve learned how to extract and find data, incorporate it, run biostatistics and write a medical article, and we’ve observed what it’s truly like to be a surgeon.”

— CARY JORDAN

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