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Medical school means lots of reading

By Erica Molina Johnson / El Paso Times
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This story originally appeared in the December 20 edition of the El Paso Times.

The Times is following Erica Alvarez, a medical student from El Paso, on the journey of her young lifetime. She is a member of the first class at the Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center Paul L. Foster School of Medicine.

EL PASO -- Erica Alvarez knew medical school would be a lot of work.

Even so, the enormous volume of reading and studying was surprising to the first-year student at the Paul L Foster School of Medicine.

"In our first week, we had over 400 pages to read in textbooks. If you've ever actually sat down and read a textbook word for word, 15 pages can take you an hour," said Alvarez, 24. "Four hundred pages in one week is like an entire textbook."

She studies more than six hours every day, and that's after her classes.

She is one of seven students from El Paso studying to become physicians at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center Paul L. Foster School of Medicine. The class completed its first term last week.

One student withdrew from the first class of 40 first-year medical students soon after it began its studies in July.

"It's been a really exciting experience. I feel like in these past couple of months I've learned an immense amount of information," Alvarez said.

The medical students are getting their education through a curriculum different from that in most other medical schools in the country.

While many medical

schools teach students one subject at a time for their first two years, the Foster School of Medicine is bypassing the



Medical student Erica Alvarez is approaching a semester break at the Paul L. Foster School of Medicine at Texas Tech Health Sciences Center. (Victor Calzada / El Paso Times)

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standard pathology and biochemistry courses. Its students instead learn the material through a series of clinical presentations while also learning medical skills.

For example, earlier this month the students learned about patients with diarrhea, its different causes and different medications to treat the illness. They saw a standardized patient -- an actor -- with the symptoms. They also spent time in the anatomy lab dissecting the relevant parts of the abdomen and gastrointestinal tract of cadavers.

"It's really neat how they worked to integrate everything and make sure that we had a really good clinical

perspective of it," Alvarez said. "We're totally different than any other medical school because we get to do that every week, which is really cool."

Dr. Kathryn Horn, associate dean for student affairs, said the students would take four courses simultaneously through their first two years of medical school: scientific principles of medicine; society, community and individual; medical skills; and masters' colloquium.

Alvarez said the integrated curriculum model was working well.

"Starting from Monday they tie it all together, and Thursday we have to put it into practice," she said.

The students are quizzed weekly.

She and the other students in her college have devised a way to handle the enormous workload. They divide up assigned objectives and take turns completing the objectives for the group. At the end of each week, the assignments are compiled and distributed to the students as study aids.

"Everybody helps each other, and we hold each other accountable, too," Alvarez said.

She has done well in her coursework, but Alvarez's anatomy class had a definite adjustment period. She had never seen a dead body before being introduced to her cadaver.

"I got to the point where I knew this is something that's important for my learning experience, and this is a small hurdle that I have to go over in order to learn and become a successful physician one day," Alvarez said. "It was a challenging experience, but I'm happy I got past it."

She will work with the same cadaver through her first two years of medical school.

"One thing I discovered was that we are as unique on the inside as we are on the outside," she said. "You would think one stomach looks the same in everybody. It doesn't."

Muscle colors vary from person to person. The lungs of a cadaver that had pneumonia are drastically different from those of someone without respiratory problems.

When a student finds an anomaly in a cadaver in the anatomy lab, the others in the room are invited to see.

She has also had an opportunity to interact with real patients at a clinic in Montana Vista -- something students at most other medical schools don't get to do until their third year.

Although she doesn't have much spare time, she is secretary of the school's Student Government Association, and is the community outreach director for the student interest group in pediatrics.

"I really want to make sure our class body also makes a point to give back to the community because the city of El Paso did so much to make this medical school possible," Alvarez said.

In the coming term, she will focus on preparing to begin her student research project. She wants to publish data about how El Paso's healthcare professionals find unusual ways of providing service in a community that is underserved medically and is largely without health insurance.

As she continues her journey, she is starting to reconsider her goal of becoming a primary-care doctor.

"I found in my classes that there's so many possibilities out there and so many different types of doctor you can be, or different specialties you can go into," she said. "It seems like there's so many different choices that I can't pin it down yet."

She still hopes to become a primary-care doctor, but she has heard from third- and fourth-year medical students that her path won't become really clear until she nears the end of medical school.

She also will begin preparing in earnest during the next term for the exam she will take at the end of her second year of medical school. It will determine the type of residency she will be allowed to complete.

"Because our school is pass-fail, our scores will be absolutely crucial to determine what residencies we get into. It also will reflect back on faculty and on the student body to (show) how successful the new curriculum is here," Alvarez said.

But, she said, she's also learning the importance of making time to relax. She usually opts for at least half an hour of exercise daily. Sometimes she heads to the kitchen for baking therapy.

Alvarez's family already turns to her for answers to their medical questions, even though she is only a first-year student. As she tried to study on Thanksgiving, a crowd of family members gathered

around and quickly turned the study session into a teaching one.

"One of my cousins used to be a gymnast and she injured her back and was like, 'I have my X-rays; let me show them to you.' So I was like, 'I really don't know that much yet, but I can try.' "

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