THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

SPRING 2026

# unm medicine

## Building a Healthier New Mexico

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# unm medicine

## leadership perspective



## at a glance



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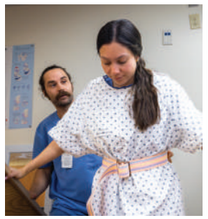
## alumni news





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**Michael E. Richards, MD, MPA**
*Executive Vice President,*
*UNM Health Sciences*
*CEO, UNM Health System*

At The University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center, our mission is simple but far-reaching: to ensure that every New Mexican has access to high-quality, compassionate care. Achieving that goal depends on people above all. Every physician, nurse, therapist, technician and scientist who trains at UNM contributes to the strength of New Mexico's health care workforce.

Recently, we have made intentional investments to expand that workforce through education. After years of working toward programmatic and enrollment growth at the Colleges of Nursing, Pharmacy and Population Health, we can now set our sights on growing the School of Medicine. The School has committed to doubling the size of its MD class over the next 10 years, a generational step toward meeting our state's physician needs. We are also growing our allied Health Professions programs, from physician assistants and physical therapists to medical laboratory scientists and occupational therapists, so that New Mexicans can receive care close to home from providers who understand their communities.

To support this growth, we are planning a new School of Medicine building designed to meet the needs of modern education and interprofessional collaboration. This facility will bring students, faculty, staff, research teams and programs together in one space, promoting teamwork, innovation and flexibility as we train the next generation of New Mexico's health professionals. It is an investment not just in infrastructure, but in the future of our people and the communities we serve.

This expansion extends across the full continuum of training. We are strengthening undergraduate medical education to prepare more students for clinical excellence and discovery, and graduate medical education to ensure that residents and fellows continue their advanced training right here in New Mexico. Each new opportunity is an investment in the future of our hospitals, clinics and communities.

These initiatives are more than numbers or program expansions. They represent a shared commitment to building a sustainable health care workforce for generations to come. As our programs grow, so does our ability to deliver care, improve outcomes and respond to the unique health challenges New Mexicans face, from rural and Tribal areas to the heart of Albuquerque.

UNM's role in this work is both a privilege and a responsibility. Together, we are shaping a stronger, more resilient system of care for our state. To everyone teaching, mentoring and supporting our learners, thank you. Your work ensures that the next generation of health professionals is ready to serve with skill, empathy and purpose.





**Patricia W. Finn, MD**
*Dean, UNM School of Medicine*

The University of New Mexico School of Medicine's mission has always been to advance the health of all New Mexicans through education, research, clinical care and community engagement. Every program, partnership and innovation we pursue is guided by one goal: to ensure that every person in our state has access to compassionate, high-quality health care.

That mission continues to grow stronger. Across New Mexico, we are expanding our health care workforce, creating new pathways for students to train and serve where they are needed most. From our allied health programs to our MD program, residency and faculty development efforts, we are working to double the number of health care providers educated at UNM. This is more than an initiative; it is a promise to our communities and a reflection of our commitment to equity in health care.

This issue of *UNM Medicine* highlights that spirit of service and innovation. Our allied health professionals, including medical laboratory scientists, physical therapists, physician assistants and many more, embody the integration of skill and empathy that defines modern medicine. Their expertise and compassion bridges the distances and strengthens the human connection at the heart of health care.

Our alumni, many of whom have returned to UNM as faculty, carry that same mission forward. Their decision to teach and mentor the next generation is a powerful reminder of how education builds community. Through their leadership, research, education and clinical work, they are shaping the future of medicine right here at home.

Looking ahead, we are excited about the potential new School of Medicine building now in development – a space designed to bring together education, innovation and collaboration under one roof. This new home will embody our vision for the future. It will be a place where discovery meets compassion and where technology is used in the most human way.

Together, we are creating that future – one that values excellence, inclusion and humanity in equal measure. I am deeply proud of the students, faculty, staff and alumni who make this vision real every day.

# LISTENING, LEARNING & LEADING

## UNM School of Medicine Strengthens Rural Partnerships Through the Dean's Tour

BY KANDACE DONALDSON

When **Patricia W. Finn, MD**, became dean of The University of New Mexico School of Medicine, she wanted to start by listening.

"I recognized the size of New Mexico," Finn said. "Although there are cities, it also has a very substantial rural population, which I had great respect for. I've done clinical rotations in remote parts of California, so I have seen the differences in providing medical care to rural and urban populations. But most importantly, I wanted to understand the needs, the strengths and the voices of the people of New Mexico."

That intention to learn directly from communities sparked the creation of the Dean's Tour, a statewide outreach initiative that brings UNM Health Sciences leadership into the regions they serve. Overall, Finn has competed four Dean's Tours since arriving in the fall of 2022.

This fall, Finn and a delegation from the School of Medicine visited Farmington, Shiprock, Gallup and Zuni Pueblo. The group met with hospital leaders, clinicians, tribal councils, educators, alumni and donors, sharing meals and conversations about what's working and what still needs to be done.

"The genesis of the tour was to learn, to listen and to see the needs that were there related to health care, but also to understand the vibrancy of this community that we call New Mexico," Finn said.

This was Finn's second tour of Northwestern New Mexico. The visits are about building long-term relationships, not one-time appearances, she said. "I didn't want us in the Dean's Office or the School of Medicine to be seen as one-and-done. We made sure people knew how to reach us. These are ongoing relationships built on respect and collaboration."

Across all four communities, Finn heard the same message: New Mexicans need better access to care, particularly in rural areas where patients often travel hours for basic services.

"Access to care was the most common theme we heard," she said. "It's not just about distance, it's about ensuring people can see a provider when they need one, in their own community."

Despite those challenges, she said, the dedication of local health care workers was inspiring. "I was absolutely floored, inspired and moved by those folks committed to their communities," Finn said. "People were working together to patch the system, regardless of academic degree or personal politics. Everyone had the same goal: that everybody gets a shot."

School of Medicine administrator Josh Corbin, MPA, added that the collaboration across systems was remarkable. "It didn't matter what organization they worked for," he said. "They were really working together to support their patients."

Those conversations underscore the importance of the School's workforce expansion initiative, a long-term effort to increase the number of health care professionals trained in New Mexico.

"We heard you," Finn said. "We need to expand the number of health care providers we train. It's about people and about ensuring that every community has access to compassionate, skilled professionals who understand their needs. More seats mean more rotations, more residency slots and more clinicians who stay."

By growing class sizes and training programs across Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Physical and Occupational Therapy and other allied health professions, UNM aims to double the number of educated and trained health care providers within the next 10 years. "Training locally is key," Finn said. "People who learn here stay here, and they become part of the fabric of care across New Mexico."

At one dinner in Gallup, Finn met a medical assistant who shared that she had always dreamed of working at a higher level in health care but was discouraged from pursuing further study.

"She said that just hearing our stories made her realize it's possible, and she has gone back to school," Finn said. "That's why these visits matter. Because we can encourage each other and say, 'You can do this.'"

Each stop reinforced what Finn calls New Mexico's "infectious humanity."

"This is an incredible time of opportunity," she said. "Yes, there are challenges, but there is also huge potential. New Mexico is a stellar example of what is possible, of what can be."

# Home ON THE Range

BY KANDACE DONALDSON
AND MICHAEL HAEDERLE

## 20 Years On, UNM Combined BA/MD Graduates Serve New Mexico's Underserved Communities

In the heart of New Mexico, where the vast landscape stretches out forever and access to health care may be nonexistent, a unique program supported by legislative funding has been quietly reshaping the state's medical workforce for 20 years.

The University of New Mexico's Combined BA/MD program, launched in 2006, addresses the critical physician shortage in rural and underserved communities by recruiting New Mexico high school seniors with an interest in medicine and the drive to make a difference.

A partnership between UNM's School of Medicine and the UNM College of Arts & Sciences, the program integrates eight years of undergraduate and medical education, creating a seamless path to a medical career.

Twenty-eight high school seniors from across the state – many from rural and underrepresented backgrounds – are selected for the program each year. They are guaranteed admission to the School of Medicine upon completing their undergraduate requirements.

Valerie Romero-Leggott, MD, professor of Family & Community Medicine and executive director of the Combined BA/MD Program, said the program's goal is to improve the health and well-being of New Mexicans.

"It was designed to address the critical physician shortage by growing our own doctors and providing incredible educational opportunities to New Mexican students who are committed to serving our communities," she said.

The program's success is reflected in its outcomes: 312 students are on track to have graduated from the program, 208 graduates have received their MD degree, and 104 graduates are currently practicing medicine.

The program was the brainchild of Paul B. Roth, MD, MS, the longtime executive vice president for Health Sciences and dean of the School of Medicine. Sometime in the late 1990s or early 2000s he grew increasingly concerned that only about 25% of the School of Medicine's MD graduates remained in New Mexico to practice.

"There was some medical education literature that identified certain factors that would lead graduates to decide where they ultimately wanted their practice," he said. "Those included where they have roots, so I thought that we would offer to a select group of New Mexican high school graduates the opportunity to enter a special curriculum at the undergraduate level that would help prepare them for medical school."

With that in mind, Roth approached Reed Dasenbrock, PhD, then dean of the College of Arts & Sciences. "He was enthusiastically excited about this idea," Roth said. "I started pulling in senior faculty. Val was very much involved in the beginning."

**By the Numbers:**

**312** students on track to graduate

**104** graduates practicing medicine

**208** graduated MDs

Over the next few years, faculty representatives hammered out the undergraduate curriculum requirements while Roth and Romero-Leggott lobbied the New Mexico Legislature for support to pay for tuition, because they knew that students graduating with more debt were less likely to select primary care specialties.

"We went to the Legislature requesting funding for scholarships so that the entire undergraduate experience would be paid for," Roth said. It took two years to put the program together, secure funding from the Legislature and recruit the first class of 24 students.

The program continues to enjoy legislative support, because it helps meet the state's unique health care needs, he said. "It was probably one of the best experiences that I had in a program that I'm particularly proud of being a part of in developing for the state of New Mexico. "

Robert Sapien, MD, associate dean for Admissions in the School of Medicine and director of the Combined BA/MD Program, credits part of the program's success to its comprehensive admissions process.

"We do a holistic review, meaning we look at more than just grades and test scores," he said. "We consider letters of recommendation, personal statements and service experiences. This allows us to select students who have the passion and dedication to serve in rural and underserved communities."

> **"When doctors look like their patients, it fosters trust and better health care outcomes."**
>
> — ROBERT SAPIEN, MD

More than half of admitted students coming from racial and ethnic backgrounds underrepresented in medicine. Two-thirds of students are admitted from outside Albuquerque and Rio Rancho, ensuring a broad reach across the state.

"Students from these populations often present experiences that wouldn't otherwise be captured in a regular application," Sapien said. "The result is a cohort of students whose demographics closely mirror the state's population. This is significant, because when doctors look like their patients, it fosters trust and better health care outcomes."

The program has been remarkably successful: Among the 104 graduates currently practicing, 57% serve in 11 different towns across New Mexico, with 24 working in their home towns. Notably, 66% of those practicing in the state are in primary care, a field in critical demand.

That may be due in part to the Summer Practicum, a standout feature of the program that immerses students in rural health care settings. "They are embedded in the community, engaging in service learning, population health and community engagement," Romero-Leggott said.

Meanwhile, to ensure students succeed academically, the program offers enriched premedical coursework, financial aid and MCAT preparation.

"We want to remove as many barriers as possible," Romero-Leggott said. "Many of our students are Presidential Scholars or Gates Millennium Scholars. They bring in a lot of their own scholarships, and this program ensures they have what they need to succeed without financial strain."

Another key aspect of the program is its efforts to retain students through curricular improvements. Over the years, it has introduced smaller, more interactive science classes and implemented a flipped classroom approach that emphasizes active learning.

Additionally, the program includes a seminar curriculum called Health, Medicine and Human Values, which covers topics such as health economics and social determinants of health. Originally developed specifically for BA/MD students, the curriculum is now offered as a minor to all UNM students.

Leah Lucero, MD, a graduate of the Combined BA/MD Program, exemplifies its success. Originally from Las Vegas, N.M., she was part of the program's 2010 cohort, majoring in chemistry and Spanish before attending medical school. After completing her general surgery residency in Fresno, Calif., she returned to New Mexico to pursue a trauma and critical care fellowship at UNM.

Reflecting on the program's impact, Lucero said, "The BA/MD program gave me the structure I needed to succeed. Coming from a small-town high school, I wasn't as academically prepared, but the program provided the support and resources to help me get through."

Being involved in the program instilled a strong sense of duty for Lucero that is reflected in her goals for the future.

"I want to really expand the influence of UNM trauma expertise to rural New Mexico," she said. "Rural populations are disproportionately affected by trauma. They have higher rates of things like motor vehicle collisions, and the survival rates for rural trauma patients compared to urban are startling."

As New Mexico continues to face physician shortages, UNM's Combined BA/MD Program invests in homegrown talent and fosters a commitment to community service to shape the future of health care in the state – one dedicated doctor at a time.

from students...

TO LEADERS

# full circle

**Alisha Parada, MD '08**
Chief, Division of General Internal Medicine

**Teresa Vigil-Baca, MD '03**
Senior Associate Dean for Education, Office of Education & Undergraduate Medical Education

**Surasri "Nat" Prapasiri, MD, MPH, FACP '16**
Associate Professor of Internal Medicine and Associate CMIO for Ambulatory Care

**Loretta Cordova de Ortega, MD '87**
Chair, Department of Pediatrics

The University of New Mexico School of Medicine is renowned for educating physicians who are deeply committed to meeting the state's health care challenges. **Many of the school's current leaders were also trained here,** and they bring a singular vision and creativity to shaping strategies to fulfill the mission of ensuring quality health care for all New Mexicans. **We share a few of their stories here . . .**



# Problem Solver

## Alisha Parada Is Finding New Ways to Provide Care for the Underserved

BY MICHAEL HAEDERLE

From her time as a medical student to today, **Alisha Parada, MD '08**, has spent her entire professional career within The University of New Mexico's School of Medicine.

The chief of UNM's Division of General Internal Medicine since 2020, Parada is also medical director of the Long COVID clinic, co-principal investigator of the Researching COVID to Enhance Recovery (RECOVER) study and medical director of UNM's street medicine team.

These intersecting clinical, educational and research roles reflect the School of Medicine's commitment to meeting New Mexicans' unique health care needs, Parada said.

"Our medical school represents opportunities for folks within our community to further their education and to be able to have a successful career in medicine and to give back to our community," she said. "We know that when your clinicians and your faculty reflect the community at large, there's better outcomes."

Parada served as chief resident in Internal Medicine at UNM before joining the faculty in 2012. She was medical director at the Southwest Mesa Clinic and had recently been named division chief of General Internal Medicine when the COVID pandemic sharply curtailed in-person doctor-patient interactions.

"Our patients were getting ping-ponged between the ER, urgent care and primary care," she said. "They were being told, 'You're not sick enough, we can't help you, go see your primary. And then primary care was saying, 'Nope, we can't help you. You're sick – you're infectious.'"Many of Parada's patients were in a hard spot because they needed medical documentation to return to work.

She launched a COVID follow-up clinic to meet these needs. "It was specifically to handle those folks who were actively infectious so that we could monitor them, even if we needed to have them drive up and do some quick vitals outside," she said.

Parada helped establish a clinic to administer monoclonal antibodies when they first became available for COVID treatment in 2021. But early on in the pandemic, she noticed that many patients continued to experience lingering symptoms – a post-viral infection syndrome that came to be known as Long COVID.

"People were coming to us saying, 'I'm having these problems – they're not going away. All my hair's falling out. I am extremely tired. Why can't I recover from x, y, z?'" she said. "We were also following up with the survivors, the people who survived those really terrible hospitalizations and ICU stays. We were the only place they could go to get follow-up care, because they were still falling within that window of potentially being infectious."

Parada is candid about the dearth of medical knowledge regarding Long COVID. "I tell patients, I don't know all the answers – nobody does right now," she said. "We're still learning, and it is really a challenge to be in that position."

Two years ago, Parada also assumed the role of medical director for UNM's newly created Street Medicine team, which brings health care out of the clinic to reach people with unique needs.

"We call it the Mobile Medical Team, because it's not only people on the streets," she said. "They're also seeing patients in shelters, in temporary housing and in respite service. We're trying to reduce visits to the ER, as well as readmissions, morbidity and mortality."

Parada is accustomed to thinking outside of the box to find new ways to deliver care to unhoused New Mexicans.

"When you stop and listen to the stories, it's incredible to hear how people ended up in those situations. They are people, they are human, and we need to bring that back. We need to bring that humanism back into medicine."

# “I’m a Lifer”

## How One School of Medicine Graduate Forged a Career in Her Home State

BY TAMARA LOPEZ

The shelves in **Teresa Vigil-Baca’s** office are full of family memories and pop culture knick-knacks. Her office is in a building that served as a cafeteria back when she was a student in The University of New Mexico School of Medicine.

She remembers eating lunch in this building. Now, as senior associate dean for education in the Office of Education & Undergraduate Medical Education, she mentors students here.

Vigil received her bachelor’s degree in biology from UNM, before applying to the School of Medicine. “I’m a lifer,” Vigil-Baca said. The Las Vegas, N.M., native, knew she wanted to stay in New Mexico for her medical education.

But, like so many other students, she didn’t get in on her first try.

“I applied again to medical school after I’d been working for a year, getting more experience – and I didn’t get in again,” Vigil-Baca said.

Then, on her third attempt, she was accepted into the School of Medicine, going on to graduate in 2003.

She never hides this part of her academic career – in fact, she tries to normalize it.

“I was always up front and open with my applying three times to medical school, the resilience and not giving up,” Vigil-Baca said. “I’m always open with that so students can see it, and then if they just need an ear, I try to be that for them.”

She credits her success to a combination of sheer will power and just enough delusion to reach her goal.

Once a student gets into medical school, there are many avenues they can continue down. For Vigil-Baca, it was an easy decision to go into pediatrics.

“We tell our students you’re going find your people,” Vigil-Baca said. “Most of the time you’ll find your people in your third year, and that was true for me. I came into that rotation and I loved the patients, of course. I really loved the nurses and the staff.”

Both her parents were teachers, and the teaching gene comes out whenever she’s with residents or students.

“I always tell students and residents to watch out for 15-month-olds,” Vigil-Baca said. “We’re going to walk in, and if you make eye contact with that kid, they’re going start crying. So just don’t look at them and just watch what happens.”

Vigil-Baca is proud of her small-town roots in northern New Mexico. “Albuquerque is home,” she said, “but I’m always going to be from Las Vegas, because, you know, your hometown shapes you.”

As a mentor, Vigil-Baca loves watching what happens when native New Mexicans like herself make their way through their programs.

“I really love the idea of shepherding people through, and if they want to stay here at UNM it’s wonderful and so cool to see them, because they want to be educators, they want to see complex patients,” she said. “They want to take care of fellow New Mexicans.”

Vigil-Baca only practices medicine one day a week now, but every day she’s fostering the next generation of home-grown health care professionals.

“You want people to come back,” Vigil-Baca said. “You want people to be successful and that’s what I liked about being in the roles I’ve been in, because I see all those students with similar backgrounds, and they see one of their own in those higher positions.”



# A Passion to Serve

## Surasri “Nat” Prapasiri is Committed to Compassionate, Equitable Health Care

BY KANDACE DONALDSON

For **Surasri “Nat” Prapasiri, MD, MPH, FACP**, the path to medicine began far from his home in New Mexico, in a small rural hospital in Thailand.

At 16, his mother sent him to stay with his uncle, a Buddhist monk, to reconnect with his Thai roots. But what was meant to be a summer abroad turned into a defining experience that would shape his life’s purpose.

When his uncle developed an infection after stepping on something sharp, he was admitted to a modest local hospital with limited equipment that served nearby villages. Doctors and nurses let young Prapasiri observe and help.

“I was fascinated by everything,” he said. “They let me follow the doctors and nurses, see trauma cases, deliver babies and help organize medications in the pharmacy.”

That fascination turned to heartbreak when a woman arrived in labor with unexpected twins, the first born premature and not breathing. With no life support equipment available, the nurses told Prapasiri to help by pressing on the infant’s chest to keep the heart going.

“I didn’t know what I was doing,” he said. “I tried to help, but the baby passed away in my hands.”

That experience left a deep impression. “I felt helpless,” he said. “If I had medical knowledge, maybe I could have made a difference. That moment stayed with me. It made me want to study medicine so I would never be in that position again.”

That sense now guides him at The University of New Mexico School of Medicine, where he serves as an associate professor of Internal Medicine and associate chief medical information officer for Ambulatory Services. A graduate of UNM’s MD and residency programs, Prapasiri has spent most of his life in New Mexico and proudly calls himself ‘a lifer.’

As a clinician educator, he blends his love of teaching with a commitment to patient-centered care. “Medicine is more than treating illness,” he said. “It’s about connecting with people on a human level – listening to their stories, their struggles, their hopes. That connection is part of the healing.”

That belief in connection extends beyond the clinic. Prapasiri now serves as vice president of the UNM School of Medicine Alumni Association, helping strengthen ties between students, residents and alumni.

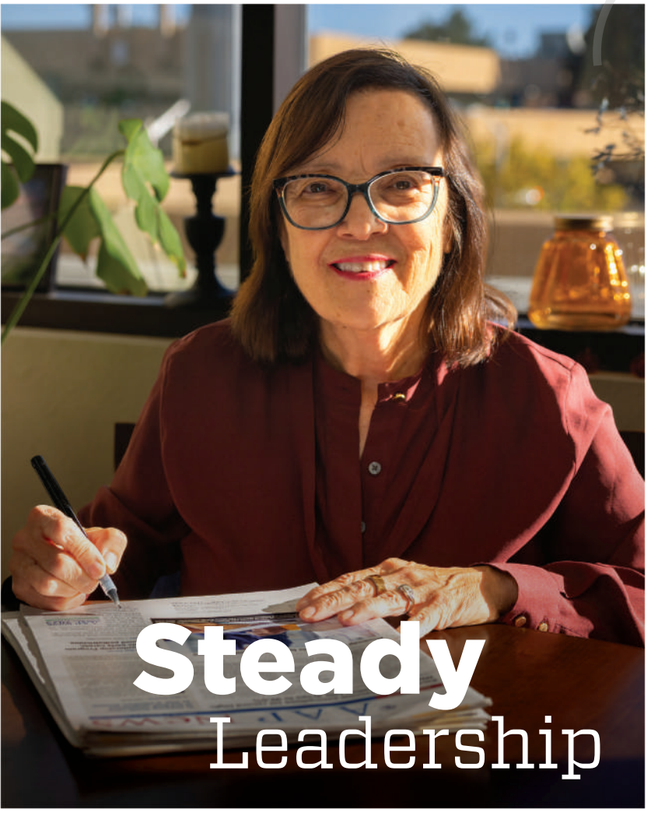
In 2024, Prapasiri was recognized with the Lineberry Physician Retention Award, which supports UNM-trained physicians who continue to practice in New Mexico. Grateful for the award’s help with his student loans, he saw it as more than financial relief. “It’s an acknowledgment of our shared purpose as physicians who stay to serve this state,” he said.

That spirit of service inspired him to give back directly.

He donated part of his award to support UNM’s Center for Inclusive Health, which provides mobile medical care to unhoused populations through the university’s Street Medicine program. He also established an endowed scholarship in honor of his mother to help future UNM medical students pursue their own paths in medicine.

“We’re not just here to teach or treat. We’re here to make health care more compassionate and more equitable,” he said. “Everyone who works at UNM is trying to build a better future for New Mexico’s health care system.”

Looking ahead, he hopes to see more physicians stay in the state, supported by strong community ties and resources that make long-term careers in medicine sustainable. “New Mexico needs more doctors who understand its people and its challenges,” he said. “That’s why I stayed, and why I’ll keep working to help others stay, too.”



# Steady Leadership

## Nineteen Years On, Loretta Cordova de Ortega Finds Reward in Her Role as Chair of Pediatrics

BY MICHAEL HAEDERLE

**Loretta Cordova de Ortega, MD '87**, has chaired The University of New Mexico Department of Pediatrics since October 2008 (having served as interim chair for 2 ½ years prior). As one of the longer-serving leaders in the UNM School of Medicine, she has mentored hundreds of students, medical students, residents, fellows and faculty.

"Education is so key, because we're building our future," she said. "Both my mom and dad were educators. I saw the impact you could have on people and give them an opportunity to maybe see things they don't see in themselves."

Cordova de Ortega's family's roots go back hundreds of years in New Mexico. She spent her early years in Los Lunas before her father moved the family to Albuquerque. She was in the second group of girls admitted to the Albuquerque Academy. After graduating in 1977, she majored in human biology at Stanford University.

She worked for a couple of years as a laboratory technician at the UNM Cancer Center before enrolling in the UNM School of Medicine and later serving a residency in pediatrics at UCLA. She returned to New Mexico in 1991 as a staff physician under the establishment of the primary care initiative at UNM Hospital.

"I was recruited to build a primary care pediatric practice and recruit private-paying patients to UNM," she says. "After a few years, we started teaching, then I got involved in doing inpatient work."

In 1994 the School of Medicine created a clinician educator track, and Cordova de Ortega transitioned to a faculty position. She served as chief of clinical operations in Pediatrics from 1999 through 2006 and as vice chair from 2001 to 2006.

She won promotion to a full professorship in 2004, becoming the first Hispanic female promoted to professor in the clinician educator track – and later, the School of Medicine's first Hispanic female department chair.

Cordova de Ortega says she made her mark through her administrative work and service on university committees. Often, she says, she was asked to serve because the rules required that a minority participant be included on committees.

"It was an opportunity to me," she says. "I could take the negative road and say, 'Oh, you just want me on the committee because you want to fulfill your mandates,' but I didn't see it that way. I chose to serve on them, and by virtue of what I did, I had a voice, and I was recognized, and I advanced because I was present."

Although her administrative duties take up most of her time these days, Cordova de Ortega continues to see pediatric patients two days a week.

"I still love seeing my patients," she said. "It's what brings me great joy. I love my administrative job and overseeing the department, but my big heart is in pediatric patients."

Nineteen years on, Cordova de Ortega still looks forward to going to work each day.

"I think I bring to the table a kind of historical memory of this institution," she said. "I think about what we've done and what we've accomplished, and it's pretty remarkable. It's been a nice journey. I never thought I would last 19 or 20 years in leadership, but I still enjoy what I do. I still feel like I have something to offer from a leadership perspective."

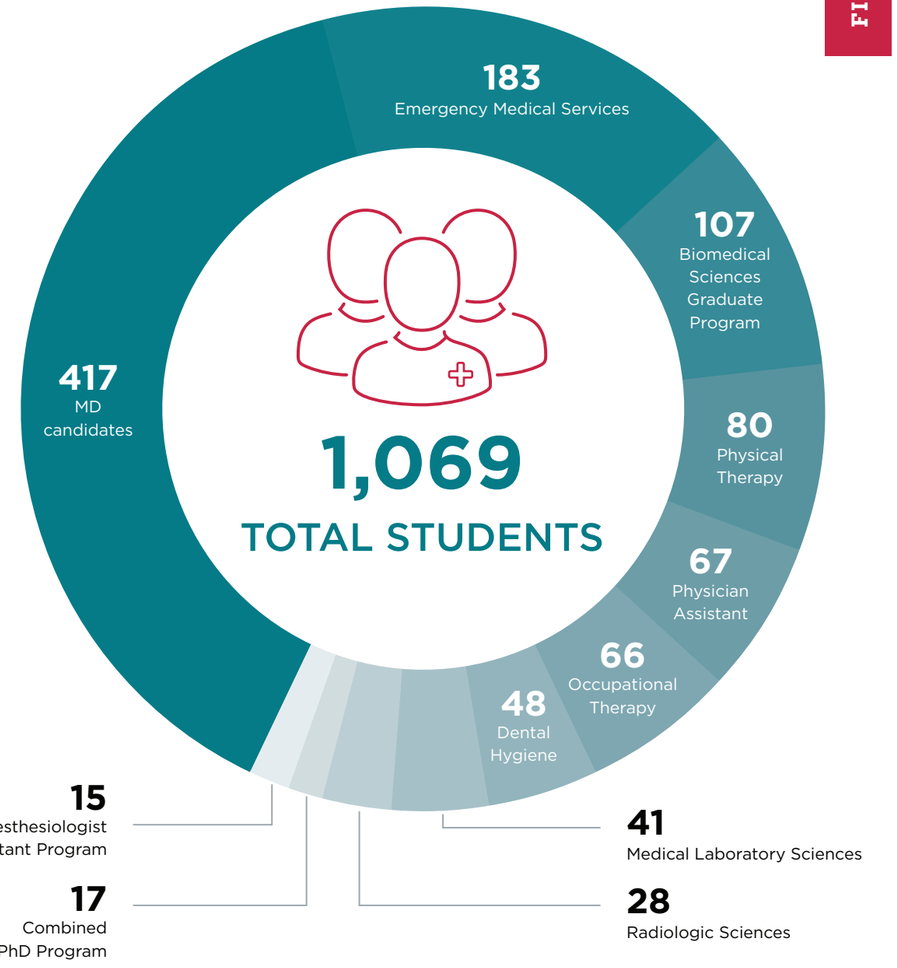




# State of the School
# BY THE NUMBERS

**795**
Interns/ residents/ fellows

**74**
GME programs

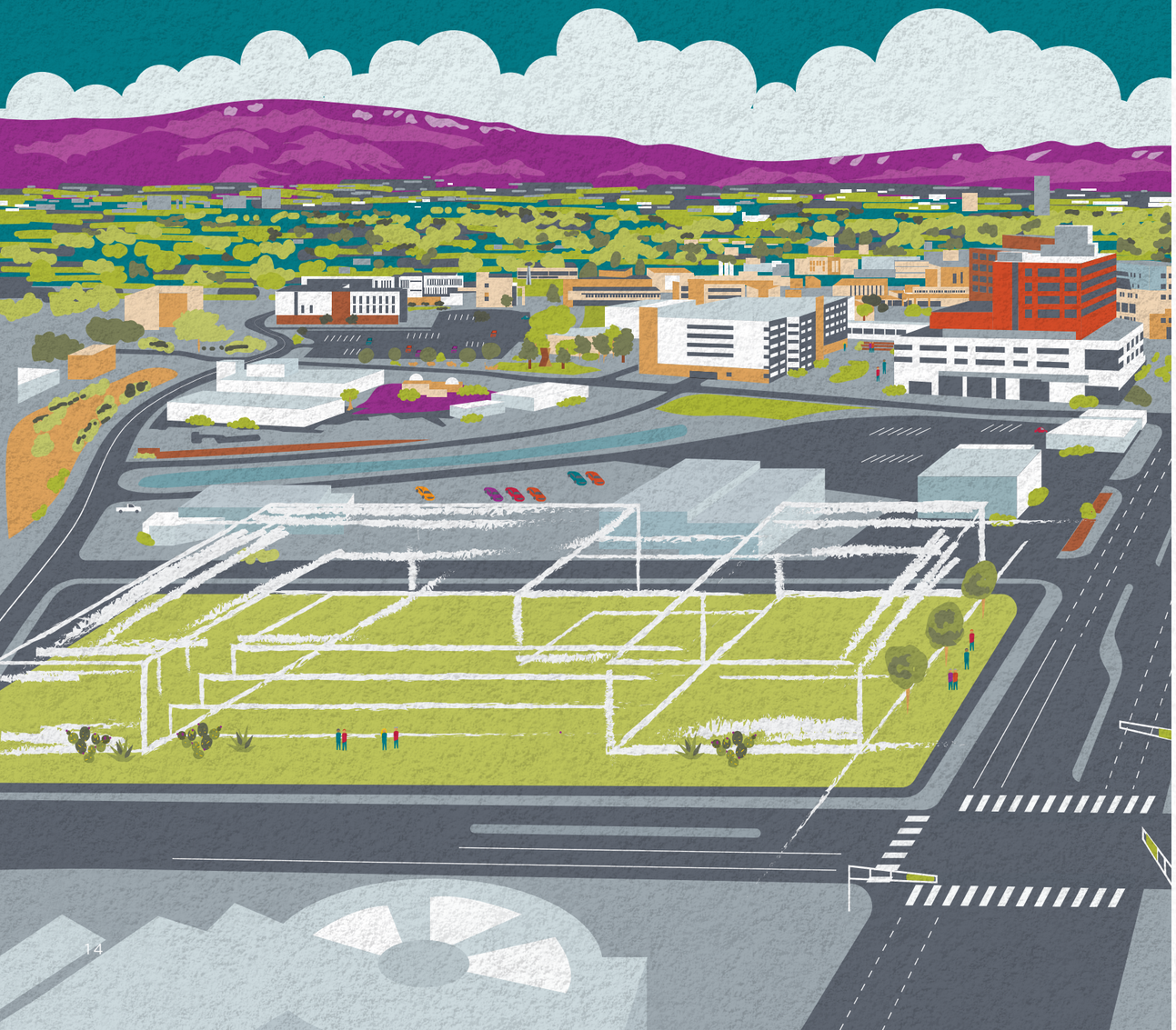



## RESEARCH & GRANTS

**650** total grants

**$182 MILLION** Research Dollars brought in

# GROWING NEW MEXICO'S Health Care Workforce



## Planning Underway to Construct a New Home for UNM School of Medicine

BY MICHAEL HAEDERLE

When **Michael E. Richards, MD, MPA**, executive vice president of The University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center and CEO of UNM Health, accepted his current position in August 2024, he knew he had to reimagine the status quo. As New Mexico moves into the future, the gap between health care providers and the patients who need them will widen if bold changes aren't made.

A looming health professional shortage led to mandates from **Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham**, the New Mexico Legislature and **UNM President Garnett S. Stokes** for UNM to graduate more professionals prepared to meet New Mexico's health needs.

"Under President's Stokes' leadership, this has become one of UNM's top priorities," Richards said. "We've already made significant strides with our Nursing and Pharmacy programs, but the time is now to make the needed investments to increase the number of physicians."

Space limitations inside UNM's clinical delivery system created barriers to grow physician educational programs, he said. But with the addition of several new clinics and the UNM Hospital Critical Care Tower, which added more than 684,000 square feet to the campus, UNM now has the space needed to provide clinical training to more students, residents and fellows.

> **After years in investing in clinical spaces, we finally have the opportunity to grow the educational programs across the School of Medicine.**
>
> *– Michael E. Richards, MD, MBA*

"We really are at a pivotal moment in time," Richards said. "After years in investing in clinical spaces, we finally have the opportunity to grow the educational programs across the School of Medicine. That is certainly our MD program, but it also includes physician assistants, occupational therapists, dental hygienists and other health professions programs. It also means we can work toward opening more residency slots. That's paramount, because we know that after residency, physicians often practice in the communities where they trained."

UNM now has set a goal of doubling the size of the School of Medicine classes in the next decade, which would mean approximately 800 medical students and around 350 new clinical faculty.

## This level of growth requires new educational space.

As director of the Capital Projects Office at the UNM Health Sciences Center, **Stewart Livsie, PhD**, is coordinating the process of building a new home for the UNM School of Medicine.

Planning and design work has been underway for months for construction of a 330,000-square-foot building at the northeast corner of Lomas and University Boulevards on the western edge of UNM's North Campus, he said.

"Our goal is to break ground winter of 2026, which is a pretty ambitious target," Livsie said. "All this is predicated on funding and things like that, but we'd be wrapping up construction in about January 2030, and our planned occupancy is fall of 2030."

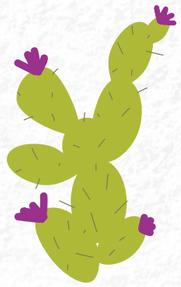
With an estimated price tag of around $600 million – much of it expected to be funded by the state, but with significant philanthropic contributions – the project would be one of the largest public construction projects in New Mexico history, yielding an estimated $1.5 billion in economic impact, he said.

The new building – programmed for five or six stories – would replace Fitz Hall, which is nearly 60 years old, antiquated by contemporary design standards and nearing the end of its serviceable life, Livsie said. Planners envision the new structure as anchoring an attractive gateway to the university, with a mix of retail, dining and housing along Lomas.

> **By the time you integrate the expansion of the workforce and the building, you're talking about huge economic gains for the state of New Mexico.**
>
> *– Patricia Finn, MD*

The School of Medicine urgently needs a new facility to accommodate the expanded classes, said **Patricia Finn, MD**, dean of the UNM School of Medicine. "Our current facility is from 1967. It really doesn't have all the added benefits of teaching in an innovative space. It would be like teaching without electrical power – that's kind of the level that we're looking at.

"We're looking to integrate the best way to allow people to live up to their potential. The building is one aspect of it, and by the time you integrate the expansion of the workforce and the building, you're talking about huge economic gains for the state of New Mexico. And the best return on investment – we're steps closer to shoring up the health care provider gap in our state."



Early in 2025 the Legislature appropriated $30 million to initiate the planning design process, Livsie said. The first phase was led by a national firm that facilitated more than 100 meetings with 300 individuals throughout the School of Medicine to map out design priorities. Meanwhile, School of Medicine leaders and faculty members conducted virtual and in-person visits to other medical schools that have built new structures.

The next step is the actual building design, a process led by Portland, Oregon-based architects ZGF, in partnership with Albuquerque design firm McClean+Yu. While details are still being finalized, the new building is likely to incorporate a number of innovative features tied to sustainability with the aim of meeting LEED Silver standards, Livsie said.

The new building is also likely to rely on passive heating and cooling technology, using heat pump and heat recovery chillers to move thermal energy within the building to where it's needed, Livsie said.

While creating more space for more students, trainees, faculty and staff, the building is being designed with an eye toward enhancing the student experience and academic performance. "Gone are the days of the big tiered lecture hall," Livsie said. "We're trying to do our best to make our facility work and perform as best it can for that student population."

One possibility is classrooms designed for "teaching in the round," he said. "The instructor actually sits in the middle of the class. The advantage of that is that most of the students are within four or five rows of the instructor. That really improves the connection between the instructor and the student and helps with retention."

The new building will also include new laboratory space to account for the lost research space in Fitz Hall when it is decommissioned and eventually demolished, Livsie said. "Fitz Hall has a lot of concrete block walls that are inflexible," he said. "A lot of the models that we've seen from other areas of the country emphasize much more of a collaborative, open laboratory environment, and also integration with data science. There's a lot of inherent flexibility built into the models that we're looking at so that we can grow or shrink a particular laboratory depending on what the grant environment looks like."

The same devotion to flexibility will be evident throughout the building, reflecting contemporary design principles, said **Laura Banks, DVM, MPH**, a professor in the Department of Emergency Medicine who has been tasked with helping plan the project.

"Erecting a new building like this will be just an absolutely stark difference from the building that we're using now," she said. "If you build for flexibility, the facility will hold value for a longer period of time."

The building is likely to become a catalyst for transforming the Lomas Boulevard corridor near the University intersection, Banks said.

"We are calling it the gateway to the North Campus," Banks said. "People will be walking to the building from all sides. There's going to be food services, lots of meeting and event spaces. It's really going to be become hub of the activity at the North Campus – really for the campus in general."

An investment of this significance into the education and training of New Mexico's future health workers workforce should give the people of our state reassurance that when they need medical care, a highly qualified professional will be there to help.

*Student receiving white coat paid for through private contributions*

# Finding The **Power in Giving**

BY CHRIS RAMIREZ

**It's not the size of a gift that matters, but its impact.**

Philanthropy at an academic medical center fuels innovation by providing flexible funding for research, education and patient care that government or clinical revenue alone can't cover. It enables the discovery of new treatments, the training of the next generation of health professionals and the delivery of exceptional care – especially for the most vulnerable patients.

The generosity of donors empowers New Mexico's only academic medical center to go beyond what is merely sustainable and pursue what truly advances health for people across the state.

For more than 15 years, **Bill Uher** has led fundraising efforts at The University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center as vice president of development at the UNM Foundation. He has seen firsthand how **philanthropic gifts, large and small, create a ripple effect of positive outcomes.**

One example, he said, is a transformative gift made by the late **Diane Klepper, MD,** who served in leadership roles at the UNM School of Medicine for 31 years. Klepper allowed the UNM Foundation to use her gift to match other endowments. Years later, that seed funding has created 25 new endowments, and 208 medical students have received scholarships totaling $735,000. *(Read more about Dr. Klepper's legacy on page 32.)*

"This is a really amazing example of someone who loved our students and wanted to leave a gift that inspired so many others to do the same thing," Uher said. "And it started with Dr. Klepper asking, 'What can we do to improve the student experience and lower student debt?'"

## The ripple effect continues.

Graduates with higher education debt are more likely to leave New Mexico for higher-paying jobs, Uher noted. By awarding scholarships, students in UNM Health Sciences programs have a greater chance to graduate with minimal debt – and those students are more likely to stay in New Mexico to practice, helping expand the state's health care workforce.

"Donors eventually realize, 'This gift is going to help me,'" Uher said. "If a gift helps keep a physician in New Mexico, it's probably a doctor I may end up seeing."

But a gift does not need to be large to make a difference. In fact, most contributions processed by the UNM Foundation are smaller donations that add up in big ways. The UNM School of Medicine combines those gifts to directly benefit students.

Funds support scholarships and initiatives such as the White Coat Ceremony. In this ceremony, first-year medical students receive their first white coat and a stethoscope, paid for entirely through private contributions.

The event marks the beginning of their journey into medicine, reminding students of the commitment required to provide compassionate, ethical, safe care – and of the profound responsibility that comes with earning patients' trust. It also shows students early on that the UNM School of Medicine will support them.

**"That's a really big impact on those students,"** Uher said. "The white coat and stethoscope cost about $250. A $20 contribution each month would cover one student. That's a small price to pay for a profound impact."

As the UNM School of Medicine prepares to move out of Fitz Hall and into a new education building planned for the intersection of Lomas Boulevard and University Boulevard, Uher said interest in the project is growing. He and his team are developing opportunities for alumni and community members to leave a permanent mark on the building and on the programs that will take place inside it.


"Something to keep in mind, this new building will allow the school to double the graduating class of medical doctors over the next decade," he said. "That means we'll need to double the support for scholarships, white coats and all the other opportunities philanthropy provides."

**A gift to the UNM School of Medicine is truly an investment in New Mexico's health care future.** By helping train a doctor today, donors increase the likelihood that a specialist or primary care provider will be available to care for them – and for generations to come.

# HEALTH PROFESSIONS PROGRAMS

## Share a Commitment to Meeting **New Mexico's Health Care Needs**

The UNM School of Medicine's Health Professions Programs comprise eight diverse disciplines that train health care team members who aid in the diagnosis, evaluation and treatment of diseases and conditions. A ninth program – Social Work – is set to launch next year.

### ANESTHESIOLOGIST ASSISTANT

No matter the procedure or medical specialty, if an operation requires anesthesia, **Cassie Langhals, EdD, MMSC, CAA** is prepared to jump into action. Her job as a certified anesthesiology assistant is to ensure a patient's safety and comfort when they are at their most vulnerable.

As a member of an anesthesia care team, working under an anesthesiologist's supervision, she is assigned her own cases. Working collaboratively with the anesthesiologist, she consents her patients, develops anesthesia care plans, assesses potential health risks, then preps a majority of them to go under general anesthesia. While they are asleep, she monitors their breathing, blood pressure and heart rate. Then, she very carefully wakes them up.

"It's so fulfilling to be a part of such an incredible moment for a patient, and with a team where that is our sole focus at that time," she said.

In Langhals's role as the director of The University of New Mexico's Master of Science in Anesthesia Program, her other job is to prepare future generations in this profession – which not only requires completion of a two-year anesthesia-focused master's program, but also most of the same prerequisites for medical school, national board certification and state licensing.

"Surgeons can only do so much on their own, and their focus should be on the procedure," she said. "Anesthesia is there to ensure the patient safety, the patient voice and that extra expertise to make sure the entire team is there for the patient at a very critical time."

*– Brianna Mortensen*

### PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS

**Micah Shaw** was a U.S. Navy corpsman with a couple of deployments to Iraq and Kuwait under his belt before he graduated from UNM's Physician Assistant Program in 2016. Now the program's director, he also puts in clinical time in UNM Hospital's Emergency Department.

The 26 students the PA program enrolls each year undergo an intensive 27-month curriculum, the first 18 months of which are didactic, with the last nine being clinical rotations, Shaw said.

Since UNM's program was launched in 1997 it has seen 399 graduates, he said. Ninety-two percent of current students are New Mexico residents and 31 percent are first-generation college graduates. Tellingly, about 90% of the program's students remain in the state to practice after graduation.

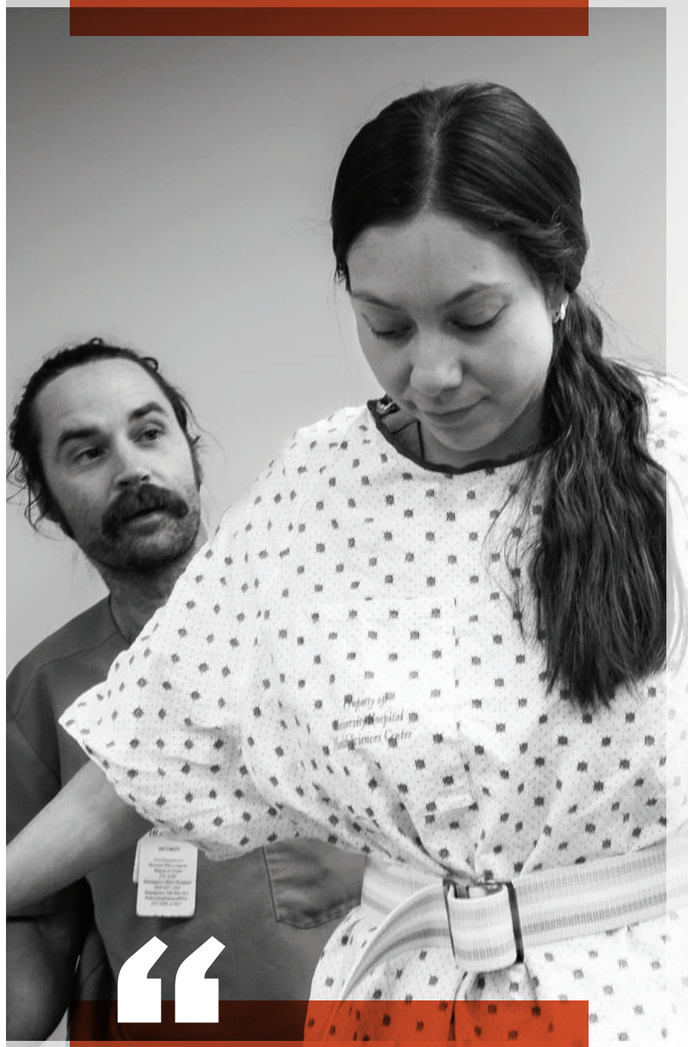
In New Mexico, physician assistants practice under the authority of a physician, but they typically have considerable latitude in terms of diagnosing and treating patients. They often serve as primary care providers, especially in rural areas.

"PAs can be doing a lot of different kinds of medical specialties – just about every specialty," Shaw said. "I used to say, 'Everything but pathology,' but I actually just made a friend who's an MD pathologist and she said that she's looking to hire some PAs. So, even there."

Along with nurse practitioners, PAs are helping to meet the critical need for practitioners in New Mexico because they can be trained much more quickly than MD students, but the process isn't easy. PA students take classes in the morning alongside first-year medical students, then continue with additional PA-specific classwork in the afternoon, he said.

"After the med students are going home to study, the PA students are coming to my emergency medicine class or our pediatrics class or geriatrics or pharmacology – all these extra things that kind of get dumped on top of them. So even though it's shorter, it's 'denser.'"

*– Michael Haederle*



> **The UNM DPT program has truly changed the rehabilitation landscape in New Mexico**
>
> — BETH MOODY JONES, PT, DPT, EDD,

### PHYSICAL THERAPY

In her seven years as chief of the Division of Physical Therapy, **Beth Moody Jones, PT, DPT, EdD**, has seen the program enroll 36 students per class to meet the growing demand for PT services in New Mexico.

The division celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2024 and has had more than 1,000 graduates since the first class of three was enrolled in 1974, Jones said.

UNM's 33-month doctor of physical therapy program is yielding meaningful benefits for the state's residents, she said. "At least 80 to 85% of our students stay in the state to practice. Approximately 50 to 60% work in under-represented areas."

Thanks to an enhanced curriculum, UNM's program, ranked by U.S. News & World Report in the top 20% of the nearly 300 PT programs in the nation, boasts a first-time 100% pass rate on the profession's licensing exam, Jones said.

PT faculty members conduct research in a state-of-the-art Gait and Motion Analysis lab and publish a dozen peer-reviewed papers each year, on average. Meanwhile, the division is unique in being one of only a handful of physical therapy programs in the U.S. that requires a Clinical Spanish course in a PT curriculum.

Teaching is the division's core mission, Jones said, and many of the faculty work closely with students who go on to publish papers and present nationally at conferences.

Now, PTs in New Mexico have gained the ability to order imaging – X-rays, CT and MRI – to diagnose musculoskeletal injuries, Jones said.

"Research shows that when physical therapists have the ability to refer for imaging, we follow the American College of Radiology guidelines appropriately and use imaging judiciously," she said. "Expanding imaging privileges for doctors of physical therapy can improve access to care and help patients get the right treatment sooner, especially when supported by strong training and clinical standards."

Jones, who joined the PT faculty in 2007, said, 'I'm really proud of this group and this program. The UNM DPT program has truly changed the rehabilitation landscape in New Mexico, and I feel privileged to have been a small part of that journey.'"

*– Michael Haederle*

## OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY

When someone experiences an injury, illness or other setback, they might have to stop doing something they love. By doing occupational therapy, that person can overcome their challenges through focused work on their individual needs – allowing them to get back to doing their favorite activities.

"'Occupation' in our profession means meaningful activities," said **Heidi Sanders, PhD, MA**, the division chief of UNM's Occupational Therapy graduate program in the School of Medicine. "We help people to be as participatory and successful in their meaningful activities as possible, whether it's physical, cognitive, sensory or mental health issues that are keeping them from that."

An occupational therapist (OT) applies creativity and innovation to address the individual patient, the patient's environment and the tasks the patient needs or wants to do, Sanders said. The treatment is highly specific to each individual.

For example, a patient could have difficulty with daily activities, such as taking a shower or brushing their teeth. Another patient might want to return to doing an advanced task, such as playing a sport or a musical instrument, she said.

Treatment could involve helping the patient strengthen muscles after an injury or making other modifications, such as changing equipment or their environment, Sanders said.

"If you had a spinal cord injury, the way you're going to get dressed and move through your house is going to be different, but you can still do it," she said. "We can help you to figure that out."

An OT can even assist someone with mental illness, such as depression, by helping that patient establish a daily routine and building on it, Sanders said.

Sanders believes in the value of this work. "We're always happy to have people get to know our profession more and our program," she said. "It's important."

*– Bryan Schroeder*

## EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES

You will find them on the North Golf Course walking path, Central Avenue, or in a nearby arroyo: students in New Mexico's only bachelor of science program in Emergency Medical Services (EMS) getting hands-on, real-world emergency training to prepare them for their roles as paramedics.

The program, one of only a handful across the country offering a bachelor's degree in EMS, is also one of the few programs to be administered through an academic Department of Emergency Medicine.

"This affords us the opportunity to have EM- and EMS-boarded physicians participating in our program, which really amplifies the level of education and quality of education we're able to provide to our learners," said EMS Academy director **Lindsay Eakes, MBA, NRP**, a UNM EMS graduate and an Albuquerque paramedic for 19 years.

Founded in 1972, UNM's EMS Academy prepares students pursuing a four-year B.S. degree in EMS. Its students also include those taking EMS training courses, from First Responder through Paramedic, continuing education, state and national license renewal opportunities for all levels of EMS, and specialty courses. It also includes the EMS programs at UNM campuses in Gallup, Los Alamos, Taos and Valencia County.

The program's impact is statewide: Its network of instructors work across the state – in frontier firehouses, rural EMS services and tribal fire departments – from Tierra Amarilla and Raton in the north to Deming and Sunland Park in the south.

"We have a huge footprint in both initial licensure and continuing education," Eakes said. "A lot of smaller services don't have the infrastructure to have an education department to support their groups through continuing education. We train hundreds of folks a year, supporting them with their continuing education to retain and renew their licensure level within the community."

The program has seen increased enrollment in rural, frontier and tribal workforce courses, Eakes said.

"The increased enrollment is really encouraging, given the profound shortage of pre-hospital providers throughout the state. We are excited to support and be part of the workforce development efforts."

*– Jill Rothenberg*



## MEDICAL LABORATORY SCIENCES

The Medical Laboratory Sciences (MLS) program at The University of New Mexico School of Medicine prepares students for one of health care's most essential and often unseen roles – performing the laboratory testing that helps clinicians diagnose and treat disease.

From analyzing blood samples to identifying infections, medical laboratory scientists are key members of every health care team.

"Our graduates are the professionals who make diagnosis possible," said **Barbara Masten, PhD, D(ABHI), MLS(ASCP)**, program director and professor in the Department of Pathology. "When a clinician needs to know whether a patient has diabetes, an infection or a heart attack, it's our students' work in the lab that helps answer those questions."

The program offers a four-year bachelor's degree preparing students for national certification and immediate entry into the workforce. Students complete hands-on rotations in clinical labs across New Mexico, graduating ready to run and interpret critical tests in microbiology, hematology, chemistry and immunology.

Associate program director **Julia Allen, MS, MLS(ASCP)CM** said the field offers diverse opportunities: "Our graduates work in hospitals, reference labs and public health facilities. Others move into management, research or industry roles supporting diagnostic technologies."

UNM's MLS program has a 100 percent job placement rate for students seeking work in the laboratory field, and most graduates stay in New Mexico. The program is currently full each admission cycle, and faculty hope that the planned new School of Medicine building will expand space for labs and instrumentation, helping train more laboratory professionals to meet statewide needs.

"For students who love science and problem-solving, this is an exciting and meaningful career," Masten said. "You may never meet the patient, but your work makes all the difference in their care."

*– Kandace Donaldson*

**"You may never meet the patient, but your work makes all the difference in their care.**

**— BARBARA MASTEN, PHD**

## DENTAL HYGIENE

For decades dental and medical care were thought of as separate disciplines, but ongoing research has found that a healthy mouth can lead to a healthy body overall.

Dentists get the credit for keeping our mouths healthy, but the unsung heroes are the dental hygienists.

"What we do is ensure the oral environment stays healthy so our patients can achieve total body health," said **Lindsey Lee, RDH, MSDH, LPH**, director of the dental hygiene program in The University of New Mexico School of Medicine.

UNM's prestigious program has been helping New Mexicans improve their oral health for years, she said.

"We serve the public by providing some of the best dental care in the state at a reduced cost, which is incredibly helpful to so many," Lee said. "The program allows students to advance their clinical skills while providing access to dental care."

Dental hygienists are like the nurses of dentistry, she said.

"Everything going on in your mouth impacts the rest of the body," Lee said. "Oral health is linked to cardiovascular health, cognitive health and so many other conditions."

That's why oral hygiene is so important – and the program training these specialists is so competitive.

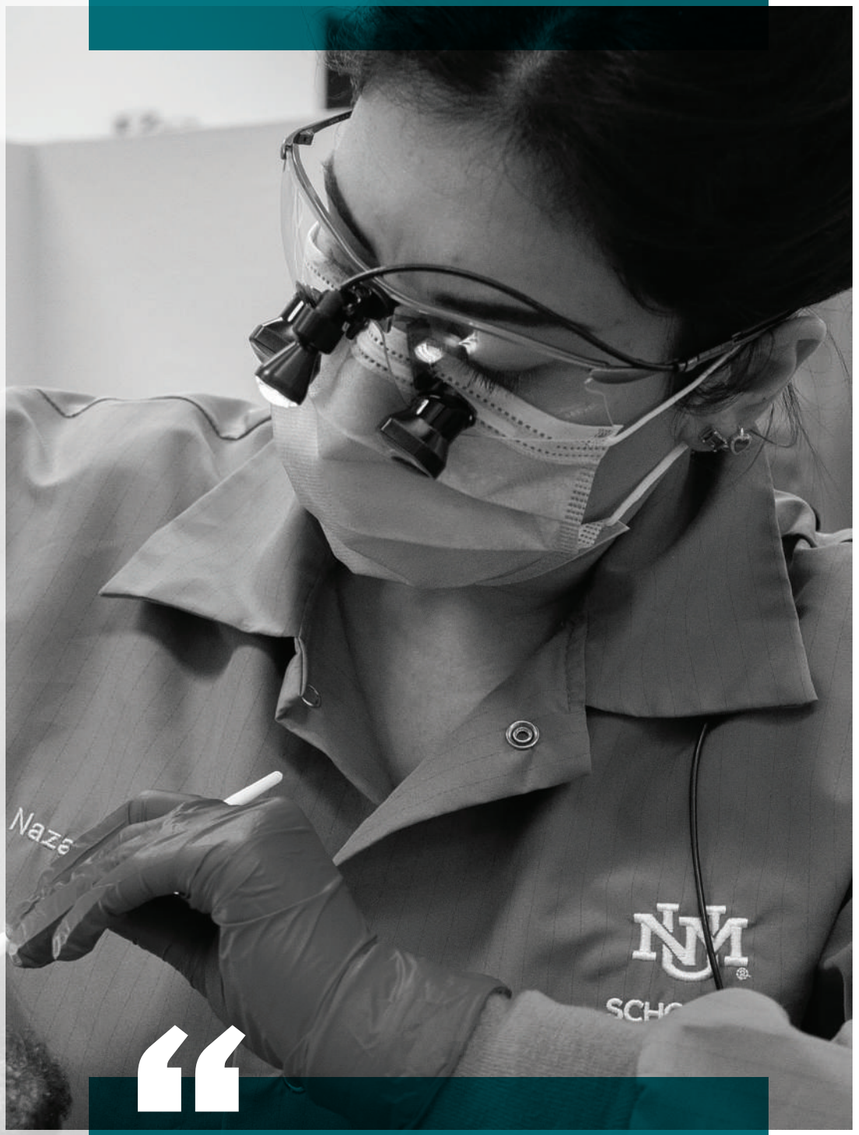
"This year, we have had more applicants than ever before that meet all of the requirements, but we only accept 24 each year." Lee said.

UNM is also nationally recognized as a trailblazer that many institutions model their curriculum after. Former directors have written textbooks that dental hygiene programs use around the country, and all the faculty have contributed to published research.

UNM is leading the way for better dental hygiene, not just in New Mexico, she said.

"It's not just about clean teeth or having a nice smile," Lee said. "Your mouth reflects what is happening inside the body, and at the same time can shape it."

*– Tamara Lopez*



**What we do is ensure the oral environment stays healthy so our patients can achieve total body health.**

**— LINDSEY LEE, RDH, MSDH, LPH**

## RADIOLOGIC SCIENCES

Radiological technologists who graduate from The University of New Mexico Radiological Sciences Program operate the imaging scanners radiologists use to diagnose disease, including X-ray, CT, ultrasound and MRI machines.

Since 1999, UNM's program has offered an accredited bachelor of science in radiological sciences degree. Today, the program has approximately 50 students enrolled and offers two concentrations in nuclear medicine and medical imaging, said interim director **Reed Selwyn, PhD**, Regents' Professor in the Department of Radiology.

To meet a growing need for radiological technologists in New Mexico, the program is adding multiple new training pathways within its baccalaureate program, he said.

Starting this year, a concentration in radiologic technology has started enrolling students, Selwyn said. "A year from now, we would like to offer an MRI pathway so students can come to UNM for a four-year degree and graduate from an accredited MRI program."

Many radiological technologists in New Mexico start in their careers with associate degrees from Central New Mexico Community College (CNM) or another training program, then continue their education at UNM to complete their bachelor's degree in CT or MRI, he said

Now, UNM Radiological Sciences faculty members are also working with their CNM colleagues to develop a streamlined integrated degree program, Selwyn said.

"The intent is for students to apply once to UNM and be accepted to both UNM and CNM, and along the way they may obtain an associate's degree and start working," he said. "Then, they would continue to get their bachelor's degree at UNM." The two programs are also considering joint hiring and increased student class sizes to meet a shortage of faculty educators.

In addition to the intensive classwork needed to master the scientific principles behind the imaging technology, students also gain hands-on experience in clinical settings, including many of the state's major hospitals, Selwyn said.

There, they master human skills like soothing a patient's fears about radiation exposure or an aversion to being confined inside an MRI scanner, he said.

"Technologists have a special superpower to help keep patients calm and hold their breath or remain still during the exam," Selwyn said. "People don't realize how much the technologist is responsible for coaxing a patient through a very difficult scan."

*– Michael Haederle*

## MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

The University of New Mexico's soon-to-be launched Master of Social Work (MSW) program will answer the critical need for more social workers throughout the state to serve in a variety of roles, particularly in hospitals, behavioral health settings, and as clinicians.

When it launches in 2026, the in-person, two-year program will include fall and spring admissions of 15-20 students each. In addition to a clinical track, it will be the only program of its kind in the state to offer a medical track.

The clinical concentration focuses on preparation for employment in mental health treatment and psychotherapy, with a pathway to licensed clinical social work (LCSW) practice.

The medical concentration prepares students for medical settings like hospitals, rehabilitation centers, nursing homes, oncology, dialysis and others. It will train students in patient advocacy, care coordination, discharge planning and working with interdisciplinary teams, to name just a few of the many openings for health care workers trained as medical social workers.

The program is part of the UNM School of Medicine's Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, said **Jen Panhorst, LCSW**, interim director of the MSW program.

"We've got a workforce shortage in behavioral health and that's certainly why we want to have a clinical focus," she said. "But we also know that there's an increasing need for social workers in medical settings. Given the expansion of the hospital, we want to make sure that we have folks who are exploring their employment opportunities within UNM and other medical settings."

With the only teaching hospital in the state, UNM is uniquely qualified to offer the medical social work track, Panhorst said, adding that the MSW program is true to the department's vision of interdisciplinary training for students who go on to work in the behavioral sciences alongside psychiatrists, psychologists and counselors.

*– Jill Rothenberg*

# BUILDING
## A NEW RESOURCE
# FOR PATIENTS

### UNM Hospital Opens Long-Awaited Critical Care Tower

BY BRIANNA MORTENSEN & BRYAN SCHROEDER

The Sept. 26, 2025, ribbon-cutting for the new University of New Mexico Hospital Critical Care Tower (CCT) drew state and local leaders, ushering in a new era of health care for New Mexicans and opening the door to a host of new possibilities for medical education.

The nine-story $842 million project encompasses 684,000 square feet and features an expanded Adult Emergency Department with 68 new beds. It also creates a total of 96 intensive care beds throughout the facility, a second rooftop helipad, a new surgical suite and some of the most advanced medical technology in the country.

"The UNM Hospital Critical Care Tower is the instrument for making sure that we have good rural health care delivery," said New Mexico **Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham**. "Whatever emergency comes our way, this campus, this university, this state will be ready."

Two of the CCT's many marvels will play a key role in delivering state-of-the-art care, said **Steve McLaughlin, MD**, UNM Hospital's chief medical officer. One is the hidden, humming data infrastructure and other technology connecting the entire facility.

"Everything we use now, from X-ray machines to machines in the operating room, to the electronic medical record, to the bedside monitors, are connected electronically, and communicate with each other and share data to help us to take care of the patient," he said.

The second major feature is the CCT's vertically integrated structure, which allows health providers and staff to move patients quickly between departments using elevators.

"This vertical integration is the way that most hospitals are designed in 2025," McLaughlin said. "It's the vertical stacking of your emergency department and imaging, with your procedural/surgical suites on top of that, and then with the ICUs on top of that. That's the ideal structure."

The CCT was first proposed in 2015, in part to address aging infrastructure and insufficient capacity in other parts of the hospital.

At the ribbon cutting event, **Michael E. Richards, MD, MPA**, executive vice president for Health Sciences and CEO of the UNM Health System, explained that not only is the expansion a gamechanger for patients, but for health education as well, facilitating future growth for UNM School of Medicine programs, as well as Pharmacy, Nursing and Public Health.



"We will expand our reach through research in the years and decades to come, and our students and trainees will learn with cutting-edge technology in spaces designed for both patient care and medical education," he said.

As New Mexico's largest teaching hospital and only Level I trauma center, planners ensured the CCT has ample spaces for training and meetings. The entire fourth floor, called The Sky Campus, is a multi-use space, inaccessible to patients and visitors, where employees can grab meals and snacks from one of several eating lounges.

Resident physicians and medical students training at UNM Hospital can rest in 22 private rooms, and providers and staff have access to thousands of lockers to securely store personal items and to dress in and out of work scrubs. In addition, much of the floor is dedicated to meeting rooms for educational purposes.

"This is a special place, the embodiment of the kind of health care providers and educators we are – as well as the kind we still aspire to be," said UNM President **Garnett S. Stokes**. "It is also a welcoming place, providing convenient and more supportive access to emergency care, while also making visitors and our Lobo health care providers feel more at ease – and, hopefully, more at home."

The ground level of the new building includes the Adult Emergency Department, as well as a CT scanner, a research office and medical gas monitors. Emergency physicians can more easily access the blood bank for transfusions, and patients who are being discharged can pick up prescriptions at the new on-site pharmacy.

The ED also features a larger waiting area, examination rooms to expedite care for patients who are sick but still able to walk, a specialized examination room for women's care, a decontamination hallway for extreme scenarios – such as a patient being exposed to radioactive material – an office for researchers, a separate physician station for teaching, a "situational isolation pod" for disorderly patients and a simulation lab with an advanced simulation manikin to help train students, residents and nurses.

The tower's first floor includes Admitting, Native American Services, Family Support a gift shop, an information desk, vending and medical imaging, such as X-ray, fluoroscopy, ultrasound, MRI and CT. The facility has three new CT scanners and two new MRI machines.

"It's going to be a great place for people to gather, if you're visiting a patient or if you're waiting for care," McLaughlin said.

The second floor is dedicated to biomedical engineering, care management and social work, an information desk, a laboratory, a pharmacy, respiratory services and a café, among other features.

The third floor has 18 operating rooms – each lined with pathogen-inhibiting stainless steel – plus four cardiac catheterization labs and six interventional radiology suites. This floor also has 72 pre-operation and post anesthesia care units for patients who are about to go into surgery or who have just come out of surgery.

**"This is a special place, the embodiment of the kind of health care providers and educators we are – as well as the kind we still aspire to be."**

*— Garnett S. Stokes, UNM President*

"The third floor, to me, is the heart of the building, and this is what we call the interventional platform," McLaughlin said. "This is an area that's full of technology and will be providing really state-of-the-art surgical and procedural services to patients."

Floors five and six house the intensive care units – Trauma Surgical, the Neuroscience, Cardiothoracic Vascular and Medical – while the top two floors are shelled in, but not occupied for the time being.

The CCT, with its interconnected ground level and other floors – and the departments that inhabit them – will be greater than the sum of its parts, delivering a new level of patient care, McLaughlin said.

"Being in a space that's designed to support the psychological, spiritual and physical healing of the patient, I think absolutely makes a big difference," he said. "From the patient standpoint, it's going to feel very different, and I think that is absolutely connected to positive outcomes."

**Dear Alumni & Friends,**

As I reflect on this past year at The University of New Mexico School of Medicine, I am filled with immense gratitude for the passionate and generous community that surrounds us. From classrooms to clinics across the state, your impact as alumni and supporters is visible in every corner of New Mexico.

Together, we’ve advanced not only the education of our future physicians and health professionals but also the health and well-being of the communities we serve. Thanks to your support, our scholarship programs have expanded access to medical education for talented students, many of whom are the first in their families to pursue this path.

Your gifts have fueled innovation, strengthened our outreach efforts, and allowed us to celebrate our alumni through events like the Lobo MD Awards Gala and our La Tierra Sagrada Society Dinner.

This year, as we prepare to further support an expanded New Mexico health care workforce, we remain grounded in our mission: to train physicians who stay and serve in New Mexico. Your continued involvement – whether through mentorship, philanthropy or sharing your story – makes that mission real.

We are honored to walk alongside you as stewards of a brighter, healthier future. I hope you feel proud of the progress you’ve helped make possible. Thank you for your dedication, your generosity and your Lobo MD spirit.

With gratitude,

**Ashley Salazar**
*Chief Advancement and External Relations Officer*


# VINTAGE RED CARPET

## 2025 Lobo MD Awards Gala Shines Bright

The 2025 Lobo MD Awards Gala lit up the Albuquerque Museum with vintage Hollywood glamour and heartfelt celebration on Sept. 6, 2025, honoring the incredible impact of University of New Mexico School of Medicine alumni. Guests arrived on a red carpet flanked by twinkling marquee lights and enjoyed an evening that seamlessly blended elegance, nostalgia and purpose.

This year’s gala recognized outstanding alumni whose contributions to medicine, education and community health exemplify the mission of the UNM School of Medicine. Eastern New Mexico Medical Center served as the evening’s Gold Sponsor, providing a $5,000 gift in support of the evening’s event. Guests also shared in the spirit of giving: nearly $14,000 was raised during the dinner for the Class of 2026 Lobo MD financial awards.

With a record turnout, powerful storytelling and stunning ambiance, the 2025 Lobo MD Awards Gala was more than an event – it was a tribute to legacy, leadership and the enduring spirit of service that defines our alumni. We can’t wait to do it again next year. – *Ashley Salazar*

La Clínica del Pueblo de Río Arriba – **Visionary Site of the Year.**

From left: Richard Pinon, MD – **Outstanding Community Educator**; Annashia Shera, MD – **Early Career Achievement**; Sharon Phelan, MD ’76 – **Distinguished Alumna**; Brant M. Wagener, MD, PhD ’09 – **Distinguished MD/PhD**; Dean Patricia W. Finn, MD, and her husband, David Perkins, MD, PhD. *Not pictured:* Andrew Hsi, MD, MPH – **Leonard M. Napolitano, PhD Award.**

# the heartbeat

## How New Mexicans Support the UNM School of Medicine from Within

BY TAMARA LOPEZ

For generations, The University of New Mexico School of Medicine has been staffing New Mexico's hospitals and clinics with top-tier medical professionals. But who are the professionals that make it all happen?

That's where Josh Corbin finds himself, keeping the heart of the UNM School of Medicine beating. As the School of Medicine's administrator, he works behind the scenes to ensure the school runs smoothly.

Corbin remembers being a student himself and how overwhelming it was compared to the quiet calm of his home in Peñasco, N.M.

"I was a first-generation college student, so I came to UNM kind of on a whim," he said. "I applied, totally unprepared, with no resources, and kind of just struggled for several years, but at UNM I found my home."

Corbin found support through campus groups like ENLACE and found other New Mexicans in situations similar to his. That sense of community inform his behind-the-scenes work in the School of Medicine.

"It's not the sexy, provocative stuff that you might envision in a medical school," Corbin said. "It's in the background. I help the school build infrastructure around processes and systems, so faculty and staff have streamlined approaches to their mission-focused work. That's everything from HR, training and development and reporting, to organizational development and capacity building."

He also gets to advocate for the staff who often don't get the recognition they deserve. "I really see myself as a champion for our staff," Corbin said. "Our institution generally revolves around our faculty and students."

With plans underway to expand the School of Medicine, he is contributing to the growth of health care across the state.

"We've been meeting with the School of Medicine community, but also communities around the state and people are truly excited about the idea of growing our own medical professionals," he said.

Growing up in Peñasco, a mountain community in southern Taos County, Corbin saw first-hand the need for more local physicians in rural New Mexico.

"My parents really have to plan out a day or two when they have medical appointments outside of their primary care," he said. "They're commuting here to Albuquerque, which is two-and-a-half hours, and it's really quite the feat to make that happen."

His family isn't the only one who must schedule days like this.

"I think we all have those stories," Corbin said. "It's just been extremely challenging to see people struggle to not know how to get care, especially local care, and we're not going to be able to get those physicians out in those communities, unless we have more of them."

That's why one of Corbin's passions is growing health care in New Mexico from within.

"Many people who make up this School of Medicine community are from rural New Mexico," Corbin said. "They come from all across the state, which matters because we come from small, rural communities ourselves and we care deeply about ensuring they're supported."





# Family Health Ordeals Drive a Career Goal to Become a **Physician Scientist**

BY JONATHAN HULSE, PHD

Growing up in Rio Rancho, N.M., I envisioned a future in health care – not only to care for patients, but to serve the communities that raised me. I didn't have any role models or blueprints for what a career in medicine could look like, but that turned out to be an opportunity to forge my own path.

At 17, I was accepted into The University of New Mexico Combined BA/MD Program. There, I developed a deep understanding of the social and structural determinants of health, the realities of practicing medicine in our state and the profound ways in which geography, access, culture and lived experience influence medical outcomes. These formative experiences shaped my vision of medicine as a means of advancing health equity across New Mexico.

I became interested in the field of neurology through painful personal experience. When I was a child, my mother was diagnosed with transverse myelitis, a rare autoimmune neurological disorder that left her partially paralyzed and in chronic pain. It took several months for her to receive a diagnosis due to limited access to specialty care, and even longer to receive necessary treatments that helped improve her condition.

That period of uncertainty had a lasting impact on me and opened my eyes to the consequences of the critical physician shortages across New Mexico for both primary and specialty care. Far too many families face prolonged suffering while waiting for answers.

### "Far too many families face prolonged suffering while waiting for answers"

I was in college when my aunt was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. I sat with her as she took in the news that she had an incurable disease that would rob her of her memories, her very identity – and eventually her life. A sense of hopelessness sat like a heavy weight on our shoulders.

Experiencing the emotional, physical and financial burden that dementia places on patients and their families reinforced my resolve to pursue a career in neurology and contribute to the development of better diagnostic tools and therapeutic options.

As an undergraduate, I joined the laboratory of Eva Chi, PhD, at UNM's Center for Biomedical Engineering, where I helped develop chemical sensors to detect misfolded protein aggregates in the brain involved in Alzheimer's disease.

My research with Dr. Chi led to a U.S. patent, and importantly, showed me how scientific discovery could be translated into real diagnostic and therapeutic innovation. While I had already been committed to becoming a physician to serve my patients directly, I realized that a career in biomedical research would also allow me to broaden my impact on patient care by improving our understanding of diseases and working to develop new therapies.

With this in mind, I entered the UNM Combined MD/PhD Program to train as a physician scientist. It takes 17 years, on average, for new scientific discoveries to be widely implemented in medicine: Physician scientists play a vital role in bridging the gap between research laboratories and patient care to facilitate rapid advances in health care.

After completing my first two years of medical school, I transitioned into my PhD training under the mentorship of Kiran Bhaskar, PhD, professor in the Department of Molecular Genetics & Microbiology. My research focused on developing immunotherapies aimed at preventing and treating Alzheimer's disease by targeting neuroinflammation and misfolded proteins responsible for brain pathology.

I helped design and test several promising vaccine candidates, resulting in multiple publications, another U.S. patent and grant funding to continue this work. A start-up company has since licensed our technology, and our team has secured funding to launch a Phase 1 clinical trial to evaluate the safety of these therapies in human patients.

Since completing my PhD, I have returned to complete the clinical phase of my medical education, now equipped with a deeper understanding of disease mechanisms and the importance of advancing science in direct partnership with clinical practice.

I aspire to one day practice as a neurologist and physician scientist in New Mexico, providing high-quality, evidence-based care while contributing to the development of novel therapeutics for neurological diseases.

## Diane Klepper's Legacy of Generosity and Service Lives On

In her 31 years as dean of admissions and student affairs at The University of New Mexico School of Medicine, **Diane Klepper, MD**, helped many students find funding for their medical education.

Klepper, who died in September 2025, established the Diane J. Klepper Scholarship Matching Fund to create scholarships by matching endowed gifts of $25,000 or greater. Since 2016, these matches have distributed a total of $735,413 to 208 scholarships for medical students.

The scholarships reflect Klepper's legacy of service to the School of Medicine and its educational mission, said her friend, Barbara McDougal, MD.

"Diane worked hard and long hours but never complained," McDougal said. "She was uplifting and compassionate. She was principled, energetic, self-motivated, and a friend to those she knew."

Klepper graduated from the University of Kansas School of Medicine and completed an internal medicine residency in Seattle before coming to UNM in 1967 for a pulmonary medicine fellowship.

After joining the UNM School of Medicine Pulmonology faculty Klepper played a key role in the response to the 1993 Sin Nombre hantavirus outbreak. For many years she traveled to Raton, N.M., to treat coal miners with black lung disease at Miners Colfax Medical Center.

She also led a group of physicians on a trip to China in 1980, one of the first tours after the country opened to the outside world.

In her administrative and educational roles within the School of Medicine, Klepper was a friend and advocate for generations of medical students. She was also the longtime medical director of the respiratory therapy program at Central New Mexico Community College.

In 2014 Klepper was presented with the UNM School of Medicine Alumni Association's Living Legend award in recognition of her decades of service. The matching fund endowment was announced the same year.

The dollar-for-dollar match enables donors to double their gift as they set up their own named endowments. The matching-fund scholarships are intended for "rural" students, defined as those who graduated from high school in a New Mexico city, town or pueblo with fewer than 5,000 residents. Students should also have a genuine need, coming from a family living at or below the federal poverty guideline.

These demographic factors increase the likelihood that the student will practice in New Mexico after completing their postgraduate training. This fulfills a critical need in a state where all but one county (Los Alamos) are federally designated as full or partial Heath Professional Shortage Areas and all but Los Alamos are designated as Medically Underserved Areas in primary care medicine.

**$735,413**
total contribution

**208**
scholarships for medical students

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