Aaron Sinclair was about 12 years old when he knew he wanted to be a physician. The Atchison youth loved science and liked to help people, and because of a club foot he had spent a lot of time in doctors’ offices. But no one on either side of his family had ever graduated from college so they just smiled indulgently when he talked about medical school.

He was a sophomore at Benedictine College when a biology professor tossed him a handout on the Scholar in Primary Care Program, currently known as the Scholars in Rural Health Program, offered by the KU School of Medicine. That nonchalant gesture had a profound effect not only on Dr. Sinclair’s life but also on the Atchison community where he founded a safety-net clinic just two years after finishing his residency and starting practice there.

Dr. Sinclair thought his chances were slim at being accepted into the rural scholars program, but he applied. He was accepted and fulfilled all of the requirements, which assured him a spot at the KU Medical School when he graduated from Benedictine with honors in 2000.

Dr. Sinclair credits the Scholars in Rural Health program with facilitating his connection with the medical school as well as local physicians. “It’s a great way to experience, as a junior or senior in college, what a primary care physician does in a small town,” he said. “Shadowing a physician in Atchison firmed up the idea of what I wanted to do long-term. There was no doubt when I started medical school that that’s what I wanted to do.”

At first, he didn’t see his future in his hometown. However, marrying his high school sweetheart and having three children by the time he finished residency, tipped them in favor of locating near their extended families.

While a resident in the Via Christi Family Medicine Residency Program, he provided locum tenens temporary coverage through the Kansas Locum Tenens program at Republic County Hospital in Belleville and worked at the emergency room in McPherson. From this experience, Sinclair had a good idea of what to expect in a small community when he began practice at Atchison Internal Medicine and Family Practice in 2007.

Dr. Sinclair’s favorite part of his rural practice is the variety, from delivering babies and performing colonoscopies to working 12-hour shifts in the ER, providing care at nursing homes and being the local college’s team physician. “I get bored easily,” he said with a laugh. “So that’s part of the attraction. I find with family medicine you never get in a rut.”

In 2009, he and Chad Johanning, MD, a high school friend, founded the Atchison Community Health Clinic. Initially, they each volunteered one night a week, but it was soon evident that the demand was much greater. “We were quickly overwhelmed by the need,” he said. “It was first-come, first-served and we usually had to turn away people.”

Dr. Sinclair wrote several grant proposals and secured funding to

His hard work and determination to make an impact within the community should serve as a model for all aspiring family medicine physicians.  

Darin Allen, KU Medical School student
hire a nurse practitioner. They also recruited volunteer physicians and nurse practitioners. Dr. Sinclair is now president of the board.

His support of local youth is evident, providing pro bono sports physicals, being a Cub Scout leader and Sunday school teacher. He also has been a mentor for three students so far in the Scholars in Rural Health Program.

Darin Allen, a KU Medical School student, noted what a valuable asset the clinic had been to the Atchison community.

“Dr. Sinclair exemplifies everything a rural community would expect from a family medicine physician,” Allen said. His hard work and determination to make an impact within the community should serve as a model for all aspiring family medicine physicians.”

Another student, Justin Stowell, said that soon after he met Dr. Sinclair, he learned of Sinclair’s “lofty dream” of beginning a free clinic in Atchison.

“He worked tirelessly to obtain a building, donations, patients, and staff for the clinic, which was truly needed in the low-income community,” Stowell said. “Within two years, his dream became a full-scale reality.”

Medical student Leah Kuhlmann, who shadowed Dr. Sinclair last summer, was struck by his dedication to the uninsured. Pulling money out of his own pocket, Kuhlmann saw Sinclair pay for a woman’s gas so she could seek drug treatment.

“Many of his OB patients are young women without insurance or anywhere else to go for prenatal care,” Kuhlmann said. “Dr. Sinclair is their support system and cares for them throughout their pregnancies.”

She was also impressed by his family, which has grown to six children, three of whom are adopted. They range in age from three months old to eight years.

“When I was with Dr. Sinclair this summer, he and his wife were in the midst of adopting a baby girl,” she said. “Along the way, they met a two-year-old girl in need of adoption. Being as open-hearted and caring as they are, they welcomed her into their family and went from a family of six to a family of eight in a very short time.”

The three rural scholar’s students – Allen, Stowell and Kuhlmann – recently nominated Dr. Sinclair for the Kansas Family Physician of the Year award.

Dr. Sinclair is a strong advocate for family medicine and recommends that students considering primary care find a physician to shadow.

“Sometimes it’s difficult to take that initial step,” he said. “It never hurts to ask, and it doesn’t hurt to ask multiple times. It’s a huge commitment to become a physician, at least an additional seven years of your life, and it’s not a decision to be taken lightly.”

Students are nervous about going into family medicine for multiple reasons, Sinclair noted. “They don’t know if they want that lifestyle, if they want the responsibility of having to know such a broad area of medicine.”

In her nomination, Kuhlmann wrote that Dr. Sinclair epitomizes what a community doctor should be.

“I am so fortunate to have met Dr. Sinclair. Reflecting on his example motivates me to join his quest in making the world a better place one patient, one child, and one student at a time.”

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