

Healthy HEARTland takes screenings across Nebraska

By Bill O'Neill

For several years, the students of the UNMC College of Pharmacy have provided screenings for diabetes, cholesterol and blood pressure throughout the Omaha area.

Over the past couple of years, however, the students have ventured across the state, seeking to screen citizens in the rural parts of Nebraska.

Now in its second year, the Healthy HEARTland project is in full swing. Over the past two school years, students have traveled to nine rural communities throughout Nebraska, checking patients' blood pressure, blood sugar and bone density. This past semester, students added cholesterol screenings during their screenings in Broken Bow, Beatrice and Norfolk.

"Thus far, the program has been a huge success," said Eric Gall, a third-year pharmacy student who is chairman of the Healthy HEARTland project this year. "We've had good turnouts in the communities, and the people have been so appreciative. I really feel that we're doing a lot of good for the public."

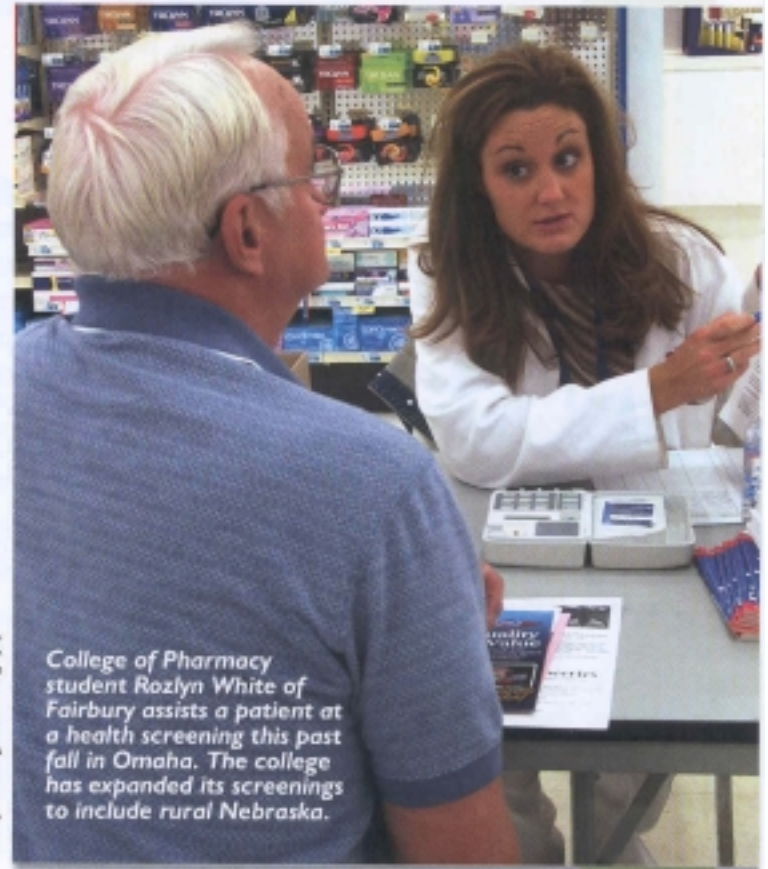
The UNMC chapter of the American Pharmacists Association-Academy of Students of Pharmacy (APhA-ASP) began Healthy HEARTland screenings in 2002. (HEART stands for Health Education Across Rural Towns).

"This was the students' idea, and they have just taken off with it," said Sam Augustine, Pharm.D., a College of Pharmacy faculty member and ASP adviser. "It just makes me aware of what a student body can do. It's really neat."

Eight pharmacy students usually go out on each community trip. During the screenings, students check participants' blood pressure, blood-glucose levels (high levels could indicate diabetes), cholesterol levels, and their bone density. During the 2003-2004 school year, the college purchased a bone densitometry unit for the students to use for Healthy HEARTland screenings and similar events in Omaha.

"This year, we identified several participants who we recommended to be checked by a physician, based on their bone density measurements," Gall said. "We're very appreciative to the college for purchasing the bone densitometer for us. It really provides a great service to the community, because if we can help prevent future complications due to osteoporosis in our patients, we can increase their quality of life by decreasing possible pain and suffering and financial burden."

Similar savings can be realized by detecting the other potential diseases such as diabetes, high cholesterol and hypertension, Dr. Augustine said. He said that local pharmacies in rural communities have been cooperative with the Healthy HEARTland program. The pharmacy usually



College of Pharmacy student Rozlyn White of Fairbury assists a patient at a health screening this past fall in Omaha. The college has expanded its screenings to include rural Nebraska.

Photo by David Sgoutos Photography

places an ad in the local paper and provides the students with room to conduct the screens.

"The students are always under the supervision of a pharmacist at the pharmacy," Dr. Augustine said. "The whole point of the screening process is to detect abnormalities and then refer the participants to their physician."

Gall has big plans for Healthy HEARTland. He'd like to do two or three screenings a month, as well as swing by a high school or two on the greater Nebraska trips to address the students.

"In the future, I'd like to speak to kids about pharmacy and other health care professions, especially the opportunities available to students in rural areas, because they get very little exposure to those types of things," Gall said. "We're reaching out to rural Nebraska. I see the Healthy HEARTland Program just getting bigger and better."

OUTREACH