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HEALTH SCIENCES CENTER

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Called to Medicine: Despite Pandemic, Interest in Medical Field Increases *First-Year Medical Students Receive White Coats*

With the COVID-19 pandemic, it was feared interest in the medical field would drop. Physicians and other health care workers faced unprecedented challenges. Instead, students are answering the call to medicine. According to the Association of American Medical Colleges, applications to medical school for were up 18%. The Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center (TTUHSC) School of Medicine Class of 2025 pledged their commitment to the profession as they received their white coats at the White Coat Ceremony Sunday (Aug. 1).

The white coat is one of the most visible symbols of the health care provider. Steven L. Berk, M.D., TTUHSC executive vice president and School of Medicine dean, said for many students, dreams of putting on the white coat begin the day they are accepted into medical school.

“These students have been working very hard for a long time,” Berk said. “They have sacrificed a lot to get to medical school. This is a celebration for them and for their parents, but it’s also a time to remind them that while this is a great profession, it comes with a lot of responsibilities. We’ve probably learned that more in the COVID-19 era than ever before. When they don their white coats, they’re also making a commitment to the profession of medicine, and all the responsibilities and professionalism that it requires.”

The TTUHSC School of Medicine had more applicants than ever before.

“This is a competitive group of students,” said Felix Morales, M.D., TTUHSC School of Medicine associate dean of admissions. “Five thousand students applied and out of those, we interviewed 1,000. We are proud to have the best 180 of those students coming to join our School of Medicine family.”

Berk said with the pandemic, the School of Medicine has learned to focus on character as well as academic accomplishments.

“I think it reminded us even more, it’s more about who they are, and then how much they know. It’s more about their commitment to medicine than it is about the organic chemistry grade they got. And it’s about resiliency, not just being able to get good grades,

but be able to handle all the challenges that may come before them as a physician. So I think even more than ever, we looked at those traits of character and resiliency, and commitment than we ever did before.”

This average GPA for class members is 3.8. Fifteen students joined the Family Medicine Accelerated Track program, 14 students will earn a joint medical and business degree with the M.D./MBA program, 10 with the joint medical and public health M.D./MPH degree, one with the M.D./J.D. program and 2 students will work toward a dual M.D/Ph.D. degree.

Berk said traditionally the White Coat Ceremony welcomes medical students into the profession of medicine where they all take an oath promising to always put their patient first, even those who are vulnerable, and most importantly, that they will begin a career of lifelong learning.

“This pandemic was a reminder of the need for physicians also to be teachers for the public, to have a great work ethic and to be committed to doing their very best every day,” Berk said. “The white coat stands for that commitment.”

Along with their coveted white coat, the medical students received their first stethoscopes from Alumni Relations. TTUHSC branded stethoscopes each year stethoscopes are sponsored by TTUHSC alumni donors and friends in order to provide each student with their first stethoscope.

Students come from 49 different schools, including Princeton University, Tufts University, UCLA, University of Washington, Emory University and Baylor University. Ninety of the students are from the West Texas area with 55 of those from Texas Tech University.

“Not all of them have just graduated college; some have had other jobs like EMTs registered nurses, athletic trainers, science teachers and elementary school teachers,” Berk said. “And these students had a tremendous interest in service with many of them volunteering in the COVID-19 pandemic. It's a very well rounded, very competitive class.”