In the Shadow of COVID 19: Program Creates Virtual Addiction Medicine Rotation

The COVID-19 pandemic magnified health care issues across the world, including opioid use disorders. Overdose-related emergency calls increased by 54 percent in Milwaukee county during March and April 2020, compared to the same time period in 2019. The onset of the pandemic also affected clinical education opportunities, removing students from onsite training rotations.

In response, the University of Wisconsin–Madison Physician Assistant (PA) Program created and implemented a virtual clinical rotation in addiction medicine, where all graduates were trained to provide lifesaving medication-assisted treatment (MAT) to patients struggling with opioid use disorder.

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Celebrating the Class of 2020

Congratulations to the 43rd graduating class of the UW–Madison PA Program! At commencement on May 8, 2020, the program recognized 52 students for completing the Master of Physician Assistant Studies degree and honored many award recipients. In lieu of an in-person gathering, faculty, staff and new graduates hopped online for a “virtual toast” from Robert N. Golden, MD, dean of the School of Medicine and Public Health. We wish them the best as they start careers as physician assistants. Welcome new PA colleagues!

See photos on page 2
something so positive could come from COVID-19?” added another. PA Program faculty Amy Parins, PA-C, and Alissa DeVos, PA-C, created the course with the help of PA Program educational technology consultant Michelle Ostmoe.

The program’s focus on addiction medicine is already making an impact. A 2020 PA Program grad recently accepted a position in a new addiction treatment facility in Madison (see p.3).

Parins led the first interprofessional virtual Addiction Medicine: Cases of Patients featuring two patients who candidly shared their lives and experiences — addiction, provider bias, treatment, recovery — with the class. Students also read and discussed I Love You, More: Short Stories of Addiction, Recovery, and Loss from the Family’s Perspective, by Blake E. Cohen.

Parins also relayed a personal experience with addiction, sharing her family’s story. Her brother Adam died from an opioid overdose in 2019.

“Sharing my brother’s suffering and death with my students brings air and light into this vast wound in my chest. It hurts more, for a while, but in the end the light must bring healing. I can feel his story carried forward in our students as they enter into the clinical world and sit across from people who are struggling with addiction with more understanding and compassion.”

— By Kate Hook

An earlier version of this article was published by the Wisconsin Academy of PAs (WAPA).
New Grad Takes on Medication-Assisted Treatment

Last March, Brittany Gerovac, PA-C ’20, along with three fellow students had just settled into her final clinical rotation in Belize. Then COVID-19 arrived on the global scene.

Returning to campus some two and a half weeks earlier than planned, Gerovac found herself instead completing her rotation year with an online module in addiction medicine (see p.1 cover story). For Gerovac, it was a last-minute change that would have an unexpected long-term benefit.

“The whole experience was really powerful,” Gerovac says of the virtual rotation. “It became very real to me that this is a field I could pursue and help a lot of people.”

Knowing that a job search during a pandemic could prove particularly challenging, Gerovac was eager to get started. “I passed PANCE, celebrated for a day, and then told myself, ‘You need to start looking for jobs!’”

Almost immediately she saw a posting from Monarch Health, a new addiction clinic on Madison’s East Side. They were looking for providers with training in medication-assisted treatment (MAT). “I thought, ‘Well, I have that.’” In fact it seemed that much of her training had prepared her for the job.

Gerovac’s interview (conducted over Zoom) reinforced that hunch. She impressed the team with her previous experience treating overdoses as an EMT and with her family medicine rotation experience in Hayward, WI, a community with a significant patient population seeking treatment for opioid and other addictions.

Just a few months after graduating, Gerovac joined Monarch Health — before their doors had even opened. Since then, she says, she has been “soaking it all up — there’s always more to learn.”

Will she return to share her experience with future students in the PA Program? “Absolutely, a hundred percent, for sure!” she says without pause. “As students we always loved seeing people who had graduated from the program. We’d think: ‘Wow, you graduated from here and now you’re doing that? That’s going to be me someday!’”

Husband Honors Wife with Donation and Inspires New Students

“Martha was a true Badger, heart and soul,” says Mark Kralovec of his wife who passed away from brain cancer in 2017. That’s why he knew it would be “so Martha” to welcome a student to the PA Program with the gift of a stethoscope and the “inspiration for them to succeed.”

Last spring 57 incoming students received a stethoscope in the mail with a note from their donor. One of those notes read:

Donated in loving memory of Martha Kralovec, PA-C, class of 2000. Congratulations on your accomplishment and welcome to the UW-Madison PA Program. Best wishes!

Passionate about surgery, Martha, MPAS ’10, PA-C ’00, found her calling as a member of the gynecological oncology team at HSHS St. Vincent Hospital in Green Bay, WI. She loved her work, and it showed.

“I can’t tell you how many of Martha’s former patients came to offer their condolences at her funeral,” Kralovec says. “Each of them brought the same message of Martha’s legacy in medicine, and that was her compassion and kindness when they needed it most.”
CLASS OF 2020

Katherine Barren
Jennifer R. Brayton
Amber Brock
Leah Burns
Ben Carolan
Kelsey Collin
Elizabeth Dassow
Betsy Divyak
Stephanie Erin Doyle
Karly Eckes
Kathryn R. Eischeid
Marisa Felker
Kate Flood
Mitchell Steven Forbes
Brittany Kay Gerovac
Allison Giebel
Liz Gilson
Mario Gjoni
Sara Kaebisch
Anna Koepke
Danielle Kollpainter
Paige Kostishak
Corey D. Kroses
Katelyn Lobnow
Mark J. McKinney
Nethaum Mizyed
Jaclyn Monteverde
Douglas Olson
Nicholas C. Pedersen
Lauren Pederson
Lorena Perez-Hernandez
Megan Perinovic
Gavin Peters
Amber Peterson
Cassie Rick
Kasey Rae Roff
Rosalyn Runde
Nicole Marie Schmitt
Daniel J. Schroeder
Alyssa Schwanda
Katie Sherman
Paige Smithback
Alyson Stanke
Sara Steffen
Mary Theresa Stone
Megan Thornton
Devanie Tucker
Amanda Walbrun
Jacob Wheeler
Mugsy Wilson
Tswvyim Yang
Laura Zeller