Pharmacy students gain real-world experience with VALOR Program

by Lisa A. Lewis

When Adam Brumfield, a third-year pharmacy student at the University of Charleston School of Pharmacy, was a young boy and visited his grandfather at the Huntington VA Medical Center, he couldn’t possibly have imagined that he would one day work there. But as a participant in the Veterans Affairs Learning Opportunity Residency (VALOR) program, Brumfield spent the past summer working as a pharmacy intern at the same facility.

The VALOR program, which is administered by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, offers students who demonstrate outstanding academic ability and leadership skills the opportunity to develop proficiency in clinical pharmacy at a VA healthcare facility through classroom and hands-on experiences, clinical practice with pharmacists and other activities. Brumfield, “So when I found out that I had been accepted into the VALOR program in Huntington, I felt like everything had come full circle, like it was meant to be.”

Brumfield’s personal connection to Huntington wasn’t the only reason he was enthusiastic about participating in the program, however. He was also looking forward to sharing the experience with his close friend and fellow UCSOP classmate Brandi Gilman, a third-year pharmacy student who had also applied and been accepted into the program in Huntington. Since Brumfield and Gilman have similar interests and career goals, they knew the VALOR program would not only help prepare them for successful careers as pharmacists, but it would also strengthen their friendship.

The VALOR program offers a variety of hands-on activities and opportunities to interact with patients. Brumfield and Gilman worked closely with the pharmacists, or “shadowed” them, on a day-to-day basis, assisting them with the patients. Routine responsibilities included reviewing patients’ histories, doing work-ups, checking patients’ doses of medication and going on surgery rounds with the pharmacists. Brumfield and Gilman also conducted discharge counseling in which they explained to patients how to take their medications properly. Throughout the program, the pharmacists asked the students questions to assess how they would respond to particular situations and provided valuable guidance and feedback.

“The VALOR program was great because I learn by doing, and it gave me hands-on experience,” says Gilman. “It offered me the opportunity to apply what I learned at UC and helped me feel more prepared for my residency. Participating in the VALOR program also had a major impact on me because I decided that I want to complete a residency at a VA...continued inside
can be life-threatening to a patient with pulmonary disease (COPD). If a patient has one of these conditions and is infected with Burkholderia cenocepacia, he or she will develop a severe form of pneumonia that is resistant to antibiotics and difficult to treat. “LpE is expressed in the most virulent form of the bacterium,” says Dr. Linger. “So I’m trying to discover what role it plays in making the bacterium so deadly. As an enzyme, LpE may assist the bacterium in gaining access into the lung cells, or it may break down the antibiotics used to kill the bacterium. We don’t know what its role is, but since it’s expressed in the most virulent form of the bacterium, we think it may help protect the bacterium in perhaps these two ways.”

In addition to conducting research, Dr. Linger also enjoys studying medicinal and edible plants of Appalachia. An expert on the subject, she teaches an elective class in folk medicine during the spring semester that focuses on medicinal plants that grow in West Virginia and the surrounding areas. Dr. Linger also gives talks throughout West Virginia about medicinal and edible plants.

A UCSOP faculty member since 2006, Dr. Linger holds a Ph.D. in medicinal chemistry from Purdue University and bachelor’s degrees in biochemistry and music from San Francisco State University. She is active on campus and serves as a co-advisor of UCPH Delta Lambda chapter of Rho Chi, the national academic honor society in pharmacy, and the Pre-Professional Health Planning and Preparedness Club (PPHPP). She is also a co-advisor of UCPH Delta Lambda Class of 2015. Dr. Linger’s work offers her the opportunity to undertake many different roles: professor, researcher, expert on medicinal and edible plants of the Clay Center every year since 2009. “Dr. Linger is an excellent scientist who kindles a love for science and bench research in both undergraduate and graduate students,” says Linger’s colleague Dennis K. Flaherty, Ph.D., associate professor of immunology at UCPH. “She is also a gifted teacher who can break down complex concepts and translate them into practical applications.”

As a scientist, University of Charleston School of Pharmacy Associate Professor of Medicinal Chemistry Dr. Rebecca Linger realizes that learning involves more than simply attending classes and completing coursework. It also involves life experience. So to help her students obtain a well-rounded education, she stresses both classroom instruction and experience. So to help her students obtain a well-rounded education, she stresses both classroom instruction and experience. So to help her students obtain a well-rounded education, she stresses both classroom instruction and experience. So to help her students obtain a well-rounded education, she stresses both classroom instruction and experience.

“Young people are welcome to come to the lab during their free time to work on scientific research. I encourage them to take advantage of this opportunity, so they can become effective lab researchers.”

Dr. Linger also gives talks throughout West Virginia and the surrounding areas. Like Gilman, Brumfield also feels that one of the most rewarding aspects of the VALOR program is the hands-on experience, which helps prepare students for residencies. “The VALOR program provides a snapshot of what to expect while completing a residency,” says Brumfield. “I definitely feel more prepared, and I also feel more confident in myself. I encourage students to apply to the VALOR program. It can help them determine which area of pharmacy interests them, so they can define their goals and pursue the career they want.”

The application process for the VALOR program is very rigorous, and only a select number of applicants are accepted into the program. Students work during the summer and may also continue to work during their third academic year. Brumfield, who holds a bachelor’s degree in microbiology from Marshall University, will graduate from the UCSOP in May 2015 with a doctor of pharmacy degree. She is president of UCPH American Pharmacists Association Academy of Student Pharmacists (APhA–ASP) chapter. Gilman was inducted into Phi Lambda Sigma Pharmacy Leadership Society in April 2013. In addition, Brumfield is also a member of the Dean’s List. She plans to pursue a career in ambulatory care pharmacy at a VA facility—preferably Huntington VA Medical Center.

Dr. Michelle R. Easton
Dean, School of Pharmacy.

PharmUC Events
Blood Sugar Screening & Hemoglobin A1C
November 15 • 10 - 2pm • UCPH Building
Drug Take-Back Program
December 13 • 10 - 2pm • UCPH Building

For more information about the VALOR program, visit http://tinyurl.com/lqearbq.