MEDICAL STUDENTS OFFER ADVICE, ENCOURAGEMENT TO HIGH SCHOOLERS

At the first table in the Gross Anatomy Lab at the UC Davis School of Medicine, high school junior Laketta Lark stood warily behind her classmates as the medical student tour guide eagerly described the dissected cadaver before them, showing features such as stringy nerves and a tumor on the donated body’s rib cage. When the group reached the second table, Lark’s reticence had vanished. Positioned in front of her classmates, Lark unflinchingly handled the lung, liver and other internal organs when invited to do so by Asseem Hemmad, a first-year medical student. For the remainder of the tour, Lark paid rapt, wide-eyed attention to the guides and their discussion of the dissected body parts.

“It was a lot better than I thought it was going to be,” said Lark, who admitted that she initially had planned to “stand back” and keep her distance from the cadaverous remains. “Everyone thought I was going to be the one to freak out.”

The tour taken last week by Lark and her classmates from West Campus High School in Sacramento was part of a program established more than 10 years ago by UC Davis medical students. The program, in which high school students tour the anatomy lab twice a week during the school year, is one of a number undertaken by School of Medicine students to augment their younger counterparts’ high school classes. The outreach programs also are intended to encourage high school students to pursue a health-care profession, while providing them with insights into the preparation required to enter medical school.

“Early on, if you can plant the seed — especially among students from high schools that have fewer resources — that if you want to be a doctor, you can be, then that can serve as powerful encouragement,” said Amerish Bera, assistant dean, Admissions and Outreach. “It can be hard to be a successful student if you don’t know what you’re shooting for.”

Ed Dagang, director of admissions for the School of Medicine, said, “What we’re able to do is strengthen the pipeline of our outreach programs to high schools. We’re helping the students make a connection beyond high school and college. At the same
time, we’re also helping to develop a qualified pool of applicants for the School of Medicine.”

Using medical students to address the high schoolers provides the younger students with figures with whom they can more easily identify in age, gender and ethnicity, Bera said.

“If a girl sees a female medical student, she might say to say herself, ‘I can be a doctor,’” Bera said. “We’re showing them role models they can relate to, people who dress like they do and talk like they do. If I talk to them, they would see a 40-year-old.”

Seven medical students share the responsibility of conducting tours of the anatomy lab, located in the basement of Tupper Hall. They volunteer during their lunch hours twice a week, taking time off only when taking midterms and finals. In the fall quarter, second-year medical students handle the tours, then turn over those duties for the winter and spring quarters to first-year students who have just completed the fall-quarter anatomy course taught by Richard Tucker, professor of cell biology and human anatomy.

To take the tour, high school students must have completed laboratory requirements for UC admissions eligibility.

Kameko Barnett, a West Campus senior who wants to become a pediatrician, said she found the anatomy lab tour valuable because “I’m more of a visual learner. The bodies looked a lot different than I thought they would.”

Barnett’s classmate, Lark, said, “It put into play everything we’ve been learning all year.”

Michaela Onstad, a second-year medical student who conducted the lab tours in fall quarter, said, “My big motivation was to encourage students who might not otherwise consider a career in medicine. I think it’s important for them to see how exciting and rewarding it can be. It’s great to get students to start thinking about these opportunities at an early age. It’s important to light a fire early.”

In addition to the lab tours, medical students take part in other activities to reach high school students. Twice a year, the School of Medicine sponsors a “High School Saturday Academy for Health Professions.” Held on four consecutive Saturdays, the academy is open to students from low-performing high schools.
Earlier this month, third-year students Dennis Rhee and Benjamin Beal conducted an anatomy lab workshop for a group of 400 middle-school students and their parents at California State University, Sacramento. The gathering was part of “The College Making it Happen Program” hosted by CSUS, UC Davis and the Los Rios Community College District.

The outreach efforts will continue in the summer. In June, first-year medical student Scott Porter will teach anatomy workshops to students at Golden State Middle School as part of a summer science academy made possible by a grant from Intel. Porter also will conduct a similar workshop for UC San Francisco’s Fresno high school program.