



**SARRC Capstone program gives first-year med students a closer look at autism**

# Doctor's Orders

BY STEPHANIE CONNER

**W**hen Casey Solem decided to go to medical school, he expected to be spending a lot of time reading textbooks and sitting in lectures. “For the most part, the first two years of medical school historically have been considered classroom time with very little clinical experience added in,” Solem, a first-year medical student at the University of Arizona College of Medicine - Phoenix (in partnership with Arizona State University). “Some schools really oppose early clinical experience; they want you to learn the textbook information first.”

But thanks to a special capstone program at the UA and the experiences provided by the Southwest Autism Research & Resource Center (SARRC) and others, first-year students are getting the opportunity to see their textbook and lecture education in action.

## Capstone Defined

When devising the college’s curriculum, Jacqueline Chadwick, M.D., associate dean for clinical affairs, knew all too well the general philosophy of medical schools: first two years are basic instruction, and the second two years are clinical.

“It made no sense,” she says. “So we made a conscious effort to begin integrating clinical experiences earlier. We did that in several ways, including the capstone.”

The 24 students in the first-year program study subject areas in intense organ system blocks. Then, for

one week after the lecture and textbook educational period, the capstone program introduces them to the clinical and patient experience.

During the capstone week following the NEI (nervous system, endocrine system, immune system) block, for instance, students had six individual experiences, visiting facilities such as the Banner Alzheimer’s Institute, a neurology rehabilitation unit at St. Joseph’s Hospital and SARRC.

## The SARRC Capstone

For each day of the capstone week, SARRC welcomed a group of five students and invited them to learn about autism in a way they hadn’t in their classrooms.

“We gave them an overview of autism and background on the ways it can present and how different it can be in different kids,” says Christopher Smith, Ph.D., SARRC research director. “They wouldn’t have received this kind of information from a textbook. This was a unique experience for them.”

After a lecture on autism, the students were able to observe a live interview with a parent of a child with autism, and then observe the child.

“Medical students need to know the traits related to autism. When a parent explains these odd things their child is doing, a pediatrician can say, ‘Hey, that sounds like autism,’” Smith says. “They need to be able to listen to the parents and understand that pediatricians really are the first line of defense. They don’t need to worry about making the official