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Holly Humphrey and husband Duane Follman | "In the last few weeks, we've started to do our after-dinner walks, and we've both commented to one another on how wonderful it is to be able to return to the basics." Photo: Stephen J. Serio

Dr. Humphrey, who, as a U of C medical student in the early 1980s, recalls not only reading results of those heart scans but hooking patients up to the machine. "These are the kind of gaps in experiential learning that we're trying to fill."

Dr. Humphrey is putting the finishing touches on the largest overhaul of curriculum at U of C's Pritzker School of Medicine in decades. Starting with the batch of students who arrive at the Hyde Park medical school in August, enrollment will be cut 15% — to 88 students from 104. She wants them to have more time with faculty physicians and researchers in more intimate settings, where

From this week's Focus

Holly Humphrey

By: [Mike Colias](#) May 04, 2009

51, dean for medical education, University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine

While making the rounds with a group of medical interns at the University of Chicago Medical Center about a decade ago, Holly Humphrey asked for a volunteer to interpret the squiggly lines on a patient's EKG.

An awkward silence passed before one student spoke up: "I've never done that before."

"I was kind of horrified," says

they can better apply all that medical literature they're digesting.

The strategy bucks the trend in academic medicine. Most schools are getting bigger as national leaders warn of a growing physician shortage. The Washington, D.C.-based Assn. of American Medical Colleges is urging schools to train 30% more physicians by 2015 to keep pace with the growing demand for doctors.

Few if any medical schools are trimming enrollment, says Jordan Cohen, former president of the AAMC, who taught Dr. Humphrey while he was vice-chairman of the department of medicine at Pritzker.

But Dr. Humphrey believes students will thrive under closer supervision from faculty physicians and researchers, which should help offset a loss of hands-on experience treating patients. Today, only the sickest patients end up in the hospital, which limits opportunities for students to practice.

"One of the hidden casualties of the high-tech, fractured health care system that has evolved over the last two decades has been that medical students are more and more removed from direct care of patients," Dr. Humphrey says.

That makes it critical for students to spend more time learning from real-life medical cases, rather than from textbooks and lectures. Students under the new system will spend half their time in small groups, discussing, say, the factors that go into diagnosing a diabetic. Today, the vast majority of their time is spent in the lecture hall.

As for the looming physician shortage, Dr. Humphrey points to statistics that show an uneven distribution of doctors by specialty and geographic area, rather than an across-the-board dearth. To address that problem, U of C has begun offering Pritzker graduates tuition aid — up to a total of \$120,000 over four years — for serving as medical residents in primary care or hard-to-find specialties at community hospitals or clinics on the South Side.

Dr. Humphrey also is overseeing U of C's transition to a new academic affiliation with Evanston-based NorthShore University HealthSystem, which split from its decades-long partnership with Northwestern University last year. It is U of C's largest-ever academic partnership with a hospital.

It may seem like an outsized to-do list, but Dr. Cohen believes his former pupil is up to the task: "She's been a major player in the policy arena and thought leader in American medical education."

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