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Med students join white-coat 'club'

Ceremony marks key step in career journey

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After three days of orientation - and in anticipation of several years of medical training - the University of South Dakota's newest class of medical students tried on their white physician's coats for the first time Friday.

The annual ceremony reminds students of their obligation to provide quality care after completing formal education, said the chairman of the school's neurosciences department.

"It means more than just a sign," Dr. Jerome Freeman said. "It's who you are and who you want to be."

John Enke was one of 54 students to receive a white coat during the ceremony at the First Presbyterian Church in Sioux Falls.

"I guess now we're part of the fraternity of physicians," Enke said. "We get to join the club now."

For Enke, the ceremony triggered a variety of emotions. He was relieved to get the coat, he said, happy to be finished with the application process and excited to begin classes.

Dr. Paul Bunger said the event marked the start of the students' careers.

Most medical schools in the U.S. have white-coat ceremonies to introduce students to the medical profession, said Bunger, dean of medical student affairs at USD's Sanford School of Medicine. USD has held a white-coat ceremony for its new medical students since 1996. "It reminds students about the human part of medicine: caring for people," he said.

Classes begin Monday at USD's Sanford School of Medicine in Vermillion. The students will spend two years taking biomedical science classes and then begin clinical training.

"Today was the beginning," Enke said.

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