

STUDENT ROUNDS

From Exam Room to Newsroom

MEDICAL STUDENTS LEARN TO COMMUNICATE LIKE JOURNALISTS TO IMPROVE COMMUNITY HEALTH LITERACY

When Matthew Infarinato '26 opened the *Rome Daily Sentinel* one morning, his name was printed in bold just beneath the headline: “My Blood Pressure Is High, But I Feel Fine! Should I Go to the Emergency Department?”

It was surreal. Infarinato, a fourth-year medical student at the Norton College of Medicine, had written the piece not as a scientific report or case study, but as an editorial for his hometown community newspaper. The article drew directly from his experiences working in the emergency department at Oneida Health, where he had seen patients rush in with mild,

symptom-free hypertension—often frightened, but rarely in medical danger.

“I wanted to help people understand what’s urgent and what’s not and to help improve my community’s health literacy on a topic that was highlighted both in my clinical experiences and in the local data,” he says.

Infarinato’s article, later shared by proud relatives and neighbors across Madison and Oneida counties, was part of a new course in the Upstate Norton College of Medicine’s Rural Medical Scholars Program (RMSP) called Targeted Rural Health Education, or TRHE.

The elective, launched in spring 2025, teaches medical students to write like journalists—translating complex medical knowledge into clear, accessible language for rural readers.

Traditionally, medical students write for peers and professors. Their assignments are steeped in research citations, formal tone, and clinical precision. TRHE flips that model on its head.

“Instead of writing for other doctors, our students are writing for farmers, teachers, and retirees—the people they see in their communities,” said Lauren Meyer, PhD, program director for Upstate’s Rural Medical Scholars Program. “Part of being a successful rural physician is community involvement. In small towns, everybody’s going to know you and look to you for guidance.”

Meyer modeled the course after a similar program at the University of North Dakota, where medical students had

been writing public health articles for local papers for nearly a decade. After hearing about it at a conference, she partnered with Lauren Bavis, a Faculty Fellow at Syracuse University’s Newhouse School of Public Communications, to bring the experience to Upstate.

Bavis taught students how to “think like journalists,” pitching story ideas, interviewing local experts, and crafting concise, readable pieces. Through workshops and one-on-one feedback sessions, she helped the students strip away jargon and humanize their message.

Each student in the pilot class chose a topic rooted in their clinical experiences. Infarinato focused on asymptomatic hypertension, inspired by his time at Oneida Health. Samantha Ballas '26, who spent a rotation at Delaware Valley Hospital in Walton, New York, wrote “Time Is Brain: Recognize the Subtle Symptoms of a Stroke,” which was published on *Syracuse.com*. Another classmate, Nathan Barott '26, wrote “Avoid the Emergency Department: Essential Chainsaw Safety Tips for Warren County Residents” for the *Glens Falls Post Star*.

All of the articles are now archived on the New York State Association for Rural Health website, giving them a lasting home beyond the newspapers where they first appeared.

For Ballas, who grew up in Connecticut and applied to Upstate’s Rural Medicine Education (RMED) track seeking a broader perspective on healthcare, the course rekindled an old passion. “I’ve always loved writing and missed it in medical school,” she says. “This class was a way to refuel that passion while contributing something tangible to the communities we serve.”

Her article aimed to teach readers how to recognize the early signs of a stroke—a condition where minutes can mean the



Samantha Ballas '26



Matthew Infarinato '26

difference between recovery and permanent disability.

"It was a great exercise in communicating with the general public," Ballas says. "We spend so much of our careers talking to patients, not other doctors. Being able to clearly explain disease and care in plain language is a critical skill."

The biggest revelation for students was how closely good medicine mirrors good journalism. Both require curiosity, empathy, and the ability to listen.

Students learned to identify the health issues most relevant to their regions by studying local community health assessments, the same data used by county health departments to prioritize resources. Then, with guidance from Bavis and Meyer, they turned those findings into stories that could change behavior.

After submitting drafts, students revised through rounds of professional-style editing. They learned how to pitch their work to editors at local newspapers, respond to feedback, and refine their message for a general audience.

"I had never written something meant for publication before," says Infarinato. "However, Lauren was an incredible resource and really helped foster my passion for writing. Working together, I gained confidence weaving my personal experiences from the ER with compelling data into a narrative that felt grounded and relatable."

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MATTHEW INFARINATO '26

When he started getting messages from family friends and patients who had clipped the article from the paper, the impact hit home. "If even one person reads my article and gains more medical knowledge as a result, I feel I've made a meaningful impact," he says.

Though the course ends with a byline, Meyer says the real goal is cultivating lifelong communication skills.

"The students tell me it's helping them become better clinicians. When they sit with a patient and have to explain what's happening in clear, compassionate language, that's where you see the connection between writing and practice," she says.

Ballas agrees. "Given all the misinformation out there, it's more important than ever for doctors to communicate effectively with the public," she says. "Patients

often come in talking about something they read online or saw on social media. If we can contribute accurate, understandable information to that conversation, we're doing real public service."

For many rural communities—where physician shortages and limited access to care remain persistent challenges—these articles may be the only form of preventive health education people encounter.

That's one reason Meyer hopes to expand TRHE to include more students and a wider range of topics in coming years. "We're training future doctors to be health advocates," she said. "They're learning not only how to treat illness but also how to engage and educate."

After completing his series of articles, Infarinato decided to make plain-language health writing the focus of his RMSP capstone project. He's already published a second editorial in the *Rome Sentinel* titled, "Your Heart Attack Didn't Start Today: How Drinking Less Soda Can Keep You Out of the ER," and is currently working on his next piece, "Alcohol: The Socially Acceptable Killer."

Meanwhile, Ballas is applying to neurology residency programs, still inspired by the idea that medical writing can change lives. "I hope to continue publishing," she said. "Maybe even write a book someday."

For both students, and for the communities they serve, TRHE has become more than a course—it's a conversation.

"It's about breaking down barriers," Infarinato says. "Especially in rural areas, physicians have to find ways to bridge the gaps in distance, trust, and medical knowledge. We have to reach out in approachable ways that makes medicine less intimidating and meet people where they are—even if that means starting with a newspaper column."