

Politics, education and boomers

Examining the nation's physical therapist shortage through the Blue Ridge lens

BY MARK CHING

In health care, the shortage of nurses is well-publicized. Nationally, the vacancy rate for RNs is 8.1 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. But there's another health care profession that is suffering an even greater shortage—physical therapists. In hospitals, the vacancy rate for PTs is 13.8 percent nationwide. Nursing homes suffer an even greater need; 18.6 percent of PT positions in skilled nursing facilities are vacant. How the dearth of physical therapists came about is a story of politics, education and an aging population.

First, the politics. In 1997, Congress passed H.R. 2015, also known as the Balanced Budget Act. One of its provisions was a \$1,500 Medicare cap on physical therapy and speech therapy that took place outside of hospitals. This limit had an immediate and adverse effect on the physical therapy profession. Before 1997, the physical therapy profession was booming. Jennifer Rich, a physical therapist and owner of ProCare PT in Roanoke, graduated from her program in 1995. "PT was really at its peak," she remembers. "Schools were developing programs... resulting in an increase of PTs with lower demand." Rich landed eight interviews after graduation, and described the job prospects as "pick your job." After Medicare imposed the therapy cap,

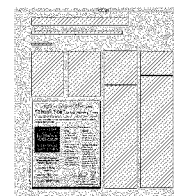
the scene changed. "A friend of mine started in 1999, and he had to have four part-time positions to make full-time work," says Rich.

The problem was in the language of the law, according to Marc Goldstein, Senior Director of Research at the American Physical Therapy Association (the APTA has been working to repeal therapy caps). "When the cap was set in 1997, there should have been language to set apart speech and physical therapy," says Goldstein. "What resulted was a \$1,500 cap for both rehab professions combined. Any kind of facility that dealt with a geriatric population was getting hit with higher costs. So they cut costs by cutting salary." Suddenly, with fewer jobs and lessened demand, physical therapy was not as attractive a profession.

Still, the need remained. The shortage is now especially pronounced in rural areas and geriatrics, according to Goldstein. That would put a region like the New River Valley at the epicenter of the PT deficit. "We see all ages and all activities here," observes Cindy Henderson, a physical therapist at Blacksburg Physical Therapy Associates, adding that she sees quite a few seniors who are living longer because of advances in medicine. Henderson also points out that while the cap doesn't apply to physical therapy services provided by hospitals, that's not where most seniors are. Sara Ruhlman, a physical

therapist at Friendship Retirement Community in Roanoke, says the Medicare caps have "forced a shift in the way physical therapists must treat their patients." Friendship tries to maximize individual therapy times and also encourages patients to attend group exercise programs in an effort to continue therapy.

Educating PTs to fill the demand presents its own challenges. After 1997, interest in PT programs dropped. In addition, the profession raised requirements for licensure. Where once a bachelor's degree was sufficient, now most states demand a doctorate-level education to practice. Two schools in Virginia are stepping up to meet this demand. Both Radford University and Lynchburg College are developing Doctor of Physical Therapy programs, and both programs are already attracting interest. Medical Facilities of America, a Roanoke-based operator of rehabilitation centers across Virginia, recently gave \$500,000 to the Radford DPT program to create RU's first endowed chair. Lynchburg College's program has 140 prospective students lined up for an inaugural class of 40, and according to Tim Laurent, the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, that number will balloon when the college starts advertising the program nationwide. Applications to PT programs fell dramatically after the Balanced Budget Act capped



therapy, according to the APTA's Goldstein. But now, according to Laurent, "the programs that are existent have more students than they can handle." Both Radford's and Lynchburg College's programs are hoping to go online in 2010.

In addition to educating new physical therapists, the profession is also trying to attract inactive PTs to return to practice. Sandy Vigh had let her PT license lapse while she stayed home to raise her two children. After experiencing post-surgery pain, she entered physical therapy as a patient of ProCare's Jennifer Rich. After 13 years out of the profession, Vigh never thought she would go back. Rich's response? "Why not?" That got Vigh thinking, and when she decided to re-activate her license, Rich offered to help. She supervised Vigh for a required 480 hours in her clinic, and now the former full-time mom is back at work alongside Rich at ProCare. While Rich did not encourage Vigh with the goal of hiring her, she was "definitely open to having another person." As for Vigh, she has found the transition relatively easy. "The research has changed a lot," she says, "but the manual techniques I learned years ago are still relevant." Vigh also notices a push to get women like her back on the job: "They've been talking about this at every VPTA (Virginia Physical Therapy Association) meeting—how to get moms to come back to the field."

So while practicing physical therapists find ways to provide care despite the cap, schools are struggling to meet the increasing

demand—one which is projected to grow an additional 27 percent by 2016, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Michael Krackow, who oversees the physical therapy assistant program at the Jefferson College of Health Sciences in Roanoke, sums the situation up this way: his program has had a waiting list for the last three years. "I get two to three e-mails a week from recruiters looking for PTs and PT assistants," he says proudly, "and all my students are getting multiple offers."

(Mark Ching is a Roanoke-based freelance writer.)



Photo: Mark Ching

Linda Meador (left) works the elliptical trainer as physical therapists Sandy Vigh (center) and Jennifer Rich supervise