

Physician assistants meet a growing need

AS DEMAND GROWS FOR PRIMARY CARE, DOCTORS' ASSISTANTS EXPECTED TO TREAT MORE PATIENTS

BY SARAH BRUYN JONES
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Doctor shortages, an aging population and national health care reform have raised the profile of physician assistants, one of the fastest-growing professions.

Physician assistants examine patients, diagnose and treat illnesses, write prescriptions and order tests. Their presence on a medical staff can mean patients can get quicker access to routine care when the physician is tied up in surgery or with a more complicated case.

It's estimated that physician assistants—who work under the supervision of doctors—can provide about 80 percent of the services patients typically get from a primary care physician.

In Roanoke, a surge of applicants seeking entrance into one of the four physician assistant education programs in Virginia has been just one of the results of the profession's climb.

HUGE DEMAND

Just five years ago, Jefferson College of Health Sciences in Roanoke had 150 people apply to attend its physician assistant program. Now, expectations are that as many as 650 people will vie for 40 spots in the class that begins in the fall 2011.

The competition is heavy at other physician assistant programs in the state. The other programs are at James Madison University in Har-

risburg, Shenandoah University in Winchester and Eastern Virginia Medical School in Norfolk.

Kirstin Harrell, 22, said she considers herself lucky to have gotten into the Jefferson College program on her first attempt. A native of Texas, Harrell graduated from Virginia Tech last spring. She said she has a friend who is applying for the third time to get into a program.

Graduates of the program get a master's degree and typically earn about \$76,000 a year in their first jobs. The mean income for all physician assistants was \$93,105 in 2009, according to the American Academy of Physician Assistants.

The profession consistently ranks among the top-growing fields in the country. In November, CNN-Money.com listed physician assistants as the second-best job in the country when factoring in pay and growth prospects. (Systems engineer came in first.)

And in December, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics said the employment of physician assistants is expected to grow 39 percent from 2008 to 2018.

Already in the Roanoke Valley, the local hospital systems have added more physician assistants to their medical staffs. The new health care reform law could drive more demand for the profession.

"PAs are well positioned for getting involved with a new health system," said Robert Hadley, an associate professor with the Jefferson

program.

SEEING MORE PATIENTS

For Harrell, the key to finding a job is educating doctors about the benefit of working with a PA.

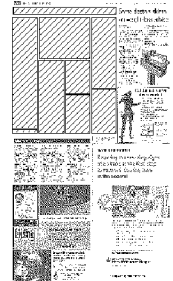
"I think it will be great if we can convince a doctor to hire us and show them how great PAs are, what they can do for the medical field," she said. "We can see more [patients] without having to be paid as much."

No one has been able to quantify just what impact health reform will have on the profession. But with an estimated 32 million more Americans acquiring health insurance within a few years, the recently passed federal health law means the demand for health care providers in general is likely to grow.

The demand is especially likely to grow for primary care providers. Even before the law passed, some researchers predicted a shortfall of more than 40,000 primary care providers by 2025. As more people get access to health care, the shortfall—and the time people have to wait to see a doctor—could grow.

"That is something that all medical professions are looking at. It is a concern," said Howard Glassroth, a spokesman for the American Academy of Physician Assistants. "We all feel the need to somehow provide incentives for primary care."

Because physician assistants work under the supervision of a doctor, they tend to follow the same specialties as doctors. That means

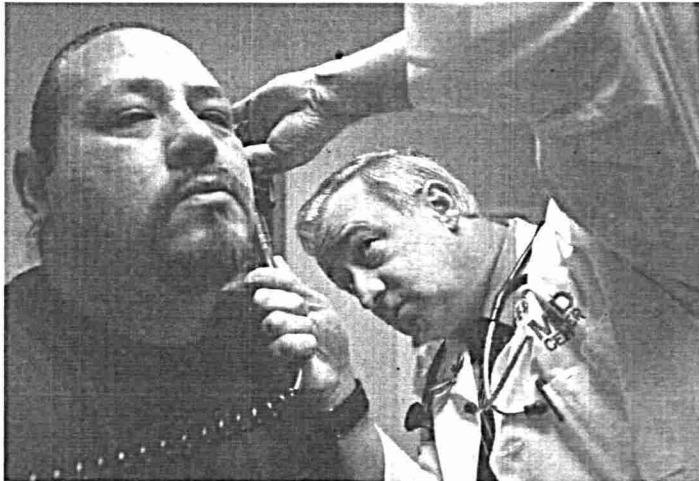


about 25 percent work in family practice, with the majority specializing in everything from various surgical areas to pediatrics.

Ona Hill, prospective student at Jefferson, said she is considering going to medical school but is weighing the costs and time involved in both. Becoming a physician assistant is a quicker path to seeing patients.

“This is shorter, two years versus four years,” Hill said. “That’s a big difference and it also means a difference in the cost.”

—Healthy Living Editor Janet Marshall contributed to this report.



McCLATCHY-TRIBUNE

Don Munoz (left) is examined by physician assistant Jess Ewing. The demand for physician assistants is growing.