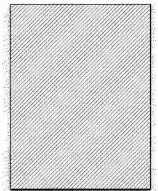
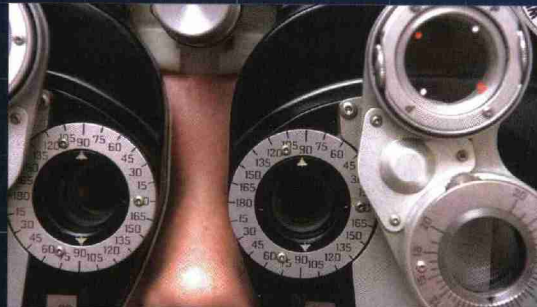


MEDICINE, JOBS



AND ROANOKE

Perfect Match?



As the largest employment sector in the valley, health care offers jobs at every level and pay scale. Here's a look at the opportunities for would-be employees, the challenges facing the providers and the future for both.

by Rob Johnson

Brooke Crouch, a former bank clerk, is feeling just a little smug about wearing a smock at work these days.

“I feel as though I’m working in something now that will always be needed,” says the 1999 graduate of Salem High School, who completed her associates degree in dental hygiene at Virginia Western Community College in June 2009 and quickly landed a better-paying job cleaning teeth than those she’d had for years as a customer service worker at a bank.

If economists and academic leaders are right, Crouch is among the millions of Americans – thousands of them in the Roanoke area – who are right to pursue a career in health care as a path to job security and relatively good wages.

The Virginia Employment Commission predicts that five of the 25 job categories expected to grow fastest in the commonwealth from 2008 to 2018 will be health related. They will include a wide range of education and training requirements – from a few weeks for nursing assistants to masters degrees for physical therapists and a decade to mint new physicians.

Of course pay scales vary greatly too, from less than \$10 an hour for hospital janitors and not much more than that for home health aides who help patients with eating, bathing and toileting to physicians earning well into six figures annually. At the bottom of the pay pyramid, where no college is required, there’s little hope of advancement or significant wage increases.

The Roanoke area is already a microcosm of where experts say the national job market is headed: Not only is Carilion Clinic the largest private employer, with more than 12,000 workers, but health care is by far the largest segment of the labor market here, accounting for about 25,000 employees – or 17 percent of the entire workforce.

What’s more, health care already leads other Roanoke area economic segments in current job openings. The November list of employees wanted in a count by state employment officials ranked Carilion Clinic at No. 1 with 95 jobs available. Others among the Roanoke area’s Top 10 employers with slots to fill: Interim Healthcare at 55, Genesis Rehabilitation with 44 and HCA, which owns LewisGale Medical Center, 42.

LewisGale Medical Center Vice President Dale Beaudoin is optimistic the facility will continue to hire

more workers, the recession notwithstanding.

“There will always be a need for quality healthcare employees at our hospital whether those openings are a result of vacancies or the addition of new services,” he says. “We currently have more than 1,500 employees at LewisGale Medical Center and often have opportunities available in most clinical areas.”

The Department of Veterans Affairs Salem V.A. Medical Center in Salem has increased its employment population by 442 since 2007 and now has 1,637 full time employees. Shelby Benois, a spokeswoman for the facility, says its hiring efforts will be driven by increase in workload and anticipation of retirement-eligible employees leaving the workforce, about 25 percent of whom will be eligible to retire by 2014. While unable to accurately forecast the potential numbers of new staffers the VA hospital will need in the future, Benois says officials there expect to “continually recruit and hire individuals.”

Roanoke’s employment base is nearing where Washington labor experts predict the entire country will be by 2018, when they say, 22 percent of all workers may be in jobs related to healthcare.

The thriving health-care job market here-about is a major factor in keeping the area’s current unemployment rate at around 7 percent, compared with more than 9 percent nationally.

And if Julie Colaw could have her way, another 44 Roanoke area jobs – all well paying – would have been filled the day she posted them. She’s this region’s director for Genesis Rehabilitation Services, a Charlottesville-based physical therapy chain with clinics typically located in assisted living facilities such as the United Methodist Home in Roanoke.

Although the recession has created a job market that’s tight overall, Colaw sees it through a different lens: not enough qualified candidates. About one third the vacancies in Colaw’s vicinity are for physical therapy assistants. These jobs require a two-year associates degree that can be earned at Virginia Western and pay in the range of \$30,000 to \$50,000 a year. Other openings are for therapists in fields such as speech pathology with masters degrees, and they pay up to \$90,000 a year in

Southwest Virginia.

The task of physical therapists and their assistants is to help patients, often elderly or those recovering from accidents, to regain mobility and reduce pain.

Job opportunities in physical therapy, like most others in health care, are expected to grow quickly as the nation's 79 million baby boomers – born between 1946 and 1964 – gradually enter retirement in the next few years. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics forecasts that the number of therapists nationally, now about 186,000, will grow 30 percent by 2018 – nearly three times the percentage increase expected in the number of jobs overall.

And while the recession has wiped out millions of jobs in a range of fields from manufacturing to news media, most health care positions have been secure. At the Eyecare & Surgery clinic in Southwest Roanoke County, Michael Geres, the practice's clinical manager, says, "We have never seen layoffs of technicians."

In fact, jobs for ophthalmologists' assistants, who help physicians test patients' eyes and aid in surgery, are forecast to grow by more than 30 percent nationally, or about 150,000 jobs, by 2018. Such jobs at Eye Care & Surgery pay in the range of \$11 to \$24 an hour, after training that may consist of a one-year certification course and another year of on-the-job training.

Demand for such technicians helps create turnover, and Geres says he's always on the lookout for promising resumes.

The demand for registered nurses is expected to grow nationally at double the overall employment market by 2018, the bureau predicts, and the Roanoke area underscores that trend. Enrollment in nursing courses leading to four-year degrees is soaring at Carilion's Jefferson College of Health Sciences, among other nearby institutions.

Still, it's unlikely that the supply of new RNs, whose median annual wage nationally is \$63,000, can keep up with demand.

"There's an incredible opportunity for jobs in nursing," says Barbara Brown, an RN and vice president of the Virginia Hospital & Healthcare Association. "But we question that Virginia will be able to produce enough nurses to meet the need."

That's partly because even though colleges and universities nationwide are expanding nursing education facilities and faculty, they haven't kept up with the number of students applying. Brown says that from 2008 to 2009 about 42,000 applicants to four-year nursing programs weren't accepted because of inadequate faculty or enough space in classrooms and laboratories.

To address the huge demand for healthcare education in Roanoke, Virginia Western is adding new space for such classes with the 68,000-square-foot Center for Science and Health Professions, scheduled to open in 2012. The center will accommodate 1,400 students for training in fields such as dental hygiene, compared with a current capacity of 900.

Margaret Andrews, head of Virginia Western's practical nursing program, says the new building may help expand the two-year curriculum she supervises. Enrollment of prospective practical nurses, who earn in the range of \$19 to \$21 an hour locally, has grown steadily at Virginia Western to 48 in the fall of 2010.

But Andrews cautions that the Roanoke area job market for her graduates isn't infinite. "I know for a fact that hospitals aren't hiring them right now," she says. She explains that some local hospitals now require four-year degreed registered nurses to perform the tasks once assigned to LPNs. Still, she says, all Virginia Western practical nursing graduates are finding jobs, mostly in long-term care facilities such as nursing homes.

Radford University's Waldron College of Health and Human Services has recently raised the size of many entering classes, "in some cases to the limits that our accreditation standards allow," says Raymond Linville, the college's dean. Total enrollment in health care classes has jumped 16 percent in the past five years even though many qualified applicants are being turned away – 25 percent of them in the speech-language pathology curriculum alone.

The trend of over capacity-plagued education programs is another example of the Roanoke area be-

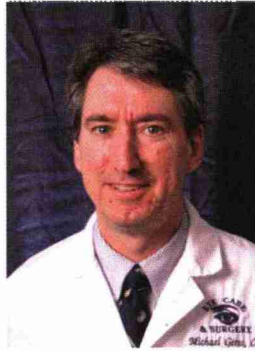
ing ahead of the national curve. One reason is that so many people here have friends or family members who already have satisfying health care jobs. Consider Cornelius Powell, enrolled in his first year at Carilion's Jefferson College of Health Sciences. "I want to be an MD," says Powell, who left the Army after six years and a tour in Iraq, partly inspired by his girlfriend's happiness working as a physician's assistant.

For some, a career in health care is the alternative to some jobs that used to represent economic security. Jaleesa Davis, a 2009 graduate of Patrick Henry High School and the Roanoke Technical Education Center, had considered pursuing a teaching degree. But the recession and concerns about school budget cuts that have resulted in layoffs of teachers were a factor in her choosing to enter Jefferson School of Health Sciences seeking a bachelors degree and a career as an RN.

"I have always wanted to do something that helped people," says Davis, a goal that figured in both teaching and nursing. "But you want to have a job and a future that's stable."

Brooke Crouch gets it. The bank employee turned dental hygienist, says her current job with the Miller & Shannon practice in Salem is a big improvement over her former field. Her experience illustrates the disparate trends in the occupation she left and her new one. Banking customer service jobs typically pay less than half the median annual average of \$67,000 nationally for dental hygienists. And job growth in the hygienist field is expected to total about 30 percent between now and 2018, at least three times the expected increase in bank customer service opportunities.

Crouch says, "I make better money and I love the direct contact and the trust my patients have in me and the care that I provide." ☆



Michael Geres, manager for Eyecare & Surgery in Southwest Roanoke, says the practice has "never seen layoffs."



Cornelius Powell: He's enrolled at Jefferson College of Health Sciences toward becoming an M.D.

Carilion Clinic, which already employs about 12,000 people, had 95 jobs available as this story was researched.



Brooke Crouch: She left a bank job to pursue an associates degree at Virginia Western; she's now in a much better job, cleaning teeth.





The 68,000-square-foot Center for Science and Health Professions at Virginia Western is scheduled to open in 2012.

LewisGale Medical Center reports "opportunities available in most clinical areas."

