

Health care fields present open job market

By SARA TOWNSEND

Staff Writer

The prognosis looks excellent for careers in the health professions, according to Marian Holmes, placement counselor for health sciences with the University Career Planning and Placement Services.

Health professions are some of America's fastest growing careers, and because there are shortages in many fields, employers are offering higher salaries, better benefits and flexible hours to attract graduates, Holmes said.

"Americans are becoming more and more conscious of maintaining and protecting their health. And this increased awareness translates into increased demand for health care facilities and personnel."

Students training in health care fields can expect to be wooed by recruiters. Forecasts from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show continued growth for all jobs associated with the health care industry, especially business and administration positions, she said.

Like the rest of the nation, North Carolina is experiencing a drop in the pool of available health care workers, said Kate McDonald, associate director of the statewide Area Health Educations Centers Program that monitors shortages in the health profession.

While there is a surplus of health care in some areas of the state, such as the Triangle, most counties in this state are under-served, she said. "We're seeing signs that rural areas are losing primary care physicians."

North Carolina ranks 28th among the states in the population-physician ratio, according to statistics from the UNC Health Services Research Center. In 1988, the ratio was 637 to 1 in North Carolina, compared to 476 to 1 nationally.

"We're seeing a diminishing supply of workers in all the health fields as well as a decline in the numbers now enrolled in health care training programs," McDonald said. "People entering many health professions today have a great situation walking in; they can choose when and where they want to work."

Students interested in health careers should talk to their advisers about

the variety of health professions. "Don't just think medicine or nursing; there are so many options now," she said. "Health careers are especially rewarding and challenging because they combine high-tech and high-touch environments."

Most students who are interested in health careers want to be doctors, said Tony Hilger, director of the Health Professions Advising Office. "Pre-med advising is by far our biggest business."

In a survey of career interests given to entering freshman this fall, Hilger said 850 of the 2,930 students who completed the questionnaire said they were interested in health careers. Of those interested in the health care field, more than half said they planned to pursue careers in medicine.

"But we know from experience that only about 150 of those saying they were interested in being doctors when they are freshman actually end up applying to medical school," he said. "What I think happens is that a fair number of those students hit a wall — say, they get a C in a chemistry course — and decide they will never make it as a doctor."

"This is the point where students don't come in here for advice, and they should." Too many students don't realize that average freshman grades will not keep them out of medical school, Hilger said. Admissions committees look more closely at grades in the junior and senior years.

"I'm afraid many people give up on medicine who don't have to," he said. "Lots of students come in here with perfectly acceptable GPAs and erroneous ideas about how high their GPAs need to be to get in."

One third-year medical student agreed. "Don't worry so much about grades or your MCAT scores. And make sure you take lots of humanities and social science courses," said Doug Esposito, who is working a clerkship in pediatrics at North Carolina Memorial Hospital.

The role of the physician is changing, he said. "If you're going into it for the prestige, don't. People don't look at doctors as heroes anymore; they're more skeptical and more

involved in their own health care."

People shouldn't go into medicine for the money, he added. "If you total up the costs of medical school and the years of residency, you certainly aren't going to get rich quick. There's always going to be money to make in medicine, but it's certainly not the easiest way to make it."

Students interested in a career in medicine need to learn about the many other health professions as well, Hilger said. With one-quarter to one-third of the applications rejected, "it's good to have a Plan B."

A recent decline in the number of

dental school applicants makes it a great time to go into dentistry, Hilger said. "Dentists are making as much money as ever. It's still one of two or three top-paying jobs."

The allied health professions offer scores of occupations ranging from "high-tech" to "high-touch" and educational levels from on-the-job training to advanced degrees, according to Robert Thorpe, associate professor in the medical allied health professions department at the UNC School of Medicine.

Allied health includes careers in cytotechnology, medical technology,

occupational therapy, physical therapy, radiological science, rehabilitation counseling and speech and hearing sciences. More than 90 employers from hospitals and health agencies attended an allied health professions career fair last March at Carmichael Auditorium. "We had to turn away companies because we had no room left," Thorpe said.

"For allied health majors, there is no such thing as unemployment. Students have four or five openings they can walk into without even looking."

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