

JOB OPPORTUNITIES IN ALASKA'S HEALTH CARE INDUSTRY

By Neal Fried and Greg Huff

Job opportunities in health care have changed radically since the early days of Alaska when health care careers were limited in scope. They ranged from a medical officer at one of the few scattered Army posts or on board a Navy or Revenue Marine ship to a small number of doctors, nurses or aides working for one of the religious groups providing limited medical services as part of their mission work. Today there are many career opportunities in health care especially in "hub" communities.

This article is part I of a two part series of employment opportunities in health care occupations in Alaska. Part I will focus on opportunities in the acute care facilities (hospitals) and long term care facilities (nursing, mental health and the handicapped). Employment in these subsectors of the health care industry represent 50% of all health care jobs in the state. Part II will discuss opportunities in clinics, dentist and physicians offices, and other health care services. Information for much of this article was obtained through personal and telephone interviews with various officials in the industry.

General Characteristics and Structure

In 1982 there were approximately 7,500 jobs in the 40 acute and long term care facilities across the state. This figure includes the PHS-ANS (Public Health Service-Alaska Native Health), military, state and local government and private facilities. The 28 hospitals provide care for residents living at the most northern to the most southern borders of the state, from the

PHS-ANS hospital in Barrow to Ketchikan General. The state is the largest provider of long-term care in Alaska. The state owns and operates 5 pioneer homes for Alaska's elderly and 2 mental health facilities. The remainder of the facilities are privately owned and operated.

Anchorage serves as a medical center for the state, hence, it has a proportionately higher number of health care facilities and jobs. Approximately 50% of total employment in hospitals and long term care in the state is based in Anchorage. Sitka, however, is the health care capital of Alaska. Over 12% of all jobs in Sitka are based in the acute or long term care facilities compared to 4% statewide. Sitka is also the home of Alaska's first hospital, built while Alaska was still under Russian rule.

Employment in hospitals and long term care facilities has grown exceptionally fast over the decade and is expected to continue. From 1970 to the end of 1982 employment in health care expanded nearly 190% in Alaska

compared to 130% for total statewide employment. Growing population, demographic changes, rising incomes and greater health consciousness have boosted health care employment.

Major Job Opportunities

Job opportunities in health care are determined by the supply of and demand for people with particular skills. Supply and demand in Alaska's health industry is influenced by population changes and migration patterns, locally available training, turnover, pay levels, and working conditions.

Demand for health care jobs in Alaska is strong at present and it will continue to be strong in the future. Population is growing, insurance coverage is becoming more widespread, and the number of older people is increasing. Many long term and acute care facilities are making major expansions in response to this growing demand. Growth of this industry in Alaska is part of a nationwide trend. One of the nation's weekly news magazines recently stated that the "...business of health care..." is "...growing faster than computers..."

The supply side in Alaska is determined by locally available training programs and in-migration of people with skills needed in this industry. Local training is available in some fields which provides the necessary trained labor force, but for many occupations in this industry, the necessary education must be acquired outside. Many people in Alaska have come from other locations and brought their skills with them. Many Alaskans leave the state temporarily to acquire these specific skills and then return.

There are shortages of skilled personnel for some health occupations in this industry while other occupations have a balanced or slight oversupply. Alaska's experience mirrors the nation's in many ways. When there is a national shortage in a particular field then the shortage is greater in Alaska, and when there is an oversupply nationally it is less true in Alaska. Either works in favor of the Alaska jobseeker.

Even if little growth were to occur, turnover creates opportunities. The industry lends itself to high turnover in many occupations because of the type of work performed and the odd hours many of these people are required to work. This is compounded in Fairbanks and Anchorage by the military rotation system as many of the employees in this industry are spouses of the uniformed military.

Given expansion of the industry and turnover, good job opportunities exist in many of the health fields in Alaska. Generally speaking, opportunities in Alaska's rural areas are better than in the urban centers. If

a person wishes to specialize it is more difficult in rural areas because the facilities are smaller. The job opportunities for all occupations represented in this industry are different. These differences will be discussed below. Opportunities for physicians will not be discussed in this article since few are directly employed in long term and acute care facilities. Opportunities for physicians will be discussed in Part II.

Nurses

Nursing staffs of hospitals or long term facilities are the foot soldiers and life blood of this industry. Twenty-five percent of the staff in Alaska's hospitals are nurses. During the past decade the biggest employment gain in the professional worker category has been for the registered nurse.

There are a variety of positions in a nursing staff, including nurse's aides, licensed practical nurses and registered nurses. Their duties vary in scope and educational preparation.

Nurse's Aide: Nurse's aides are also referred to as psychiatric aides and client development technicians, depending on the type of facility they work in. No formal training beyond a high school degree is required (and a high school degree is not always required). The aides perform a variety of duties, including making beds, bathing patients, cleaning rooms, taking temperatures, helping patients adjust to social situations and restraining patients. A nurse's aide must like working with people.

Job opportunities as nurse's aides are very good. A person wishing to pursue this line of work in Alaska's urban areas should have little problem finding work. In smaller communities, where hospitals exist, this may be somewhat more difficult due to the limited number of openings, but opportunities do exist. Turnover is high because of the hours, generally low pay and the nature of the work. For a person interested in a nurse's career working as a nurse's aide as a first step would prove to be an invaluable experience.

Licensed Practical Nurse: All the long term and acute facilities employ Licensed Practical Nurses. One year of formal training is required in addition to passing an exam given by the State Board of Nurses. Under the direction of doctors and registered nurses, LPNs provide a variety of care to patients.

It is generally felt that there is presently an oversupply of LPNs, and this is not expected to change. Some facilities are phasing out the use of LPNs because they are limited in their scope of work. Many smaller hospitals are phasing LPNs out because they have a very small staff of nurses during off hours (sometimes one) and in many cases an LPN cannot provide all the services necessary. Some of the larger hospitals are moving towards more

professional staff because of the increasing sophistication and specialization in health care. With some exceptions, LPNs are more widely used in nursing homes and similar settings.

Since only one additional year of education is required to become a registered nurse, a person desiring to pursue a nursing career would be better off getting the additional education. Job opportunities and the career path would vastly improve.

Registered Nurse: RNs employed in long term health facilities include those with 2 year, 3 year, baccalaureate, masters and doctorate degrees. RNs administer a myriad of health care functions and often supervise LPNs, nurse's aides and orderlies.

In Alaska the overall employment picture for RNs is competitive but at the same time good. A steady supply of RNs is found in the urban areas. A person may not find work immediately, but because of turnover and growth, opportunities are generally good.

In most of the smaller communities with long term or acute care facilities RNs are in short supply. These facilities have great difficulty attracting enough qualified RNs. The smaller facilities are generally looking for someone with good all-around experience. They do not have the luxury of hiring RNs who specialize in one particular area but prefer nurses with prenatal to critical care experience. In the larger facilities specialization is often the rule and shortages of RNs in geriatrics, intensive prenatal and critical care are not unusual. Though experience is important, newly graduated nurses need not panic. According to the University of Alaska's School of Nursing, 98% of their graduates find work within 3 months of graduation.

Therapists

The two major groups of therapists found in hospitals and long term care facilities are physical and respiratory therapists.

Physical Therapist: A physical therapist works to help restore and improve physical mobility of patients. In our interviews, we found that physical therapist was one occupation where demand far outweighed supply. A number of facilities cannot find a therapist to hire so most contract out for these services. The shortage is apparently nationwide and is expected to continue into the near future. If a person is interested in this type of work, job opportunities abound.

If one does not want to commit themselves to a 4-year educational program to become a physical therapist, there are positions for physical therapist technicians who administer care under the supervision of a qualified

therapist.

Respiratory Therapist: Respiratory therapists in a hospital setting often work in emergency situations where breathing stops or respiratory problems occur. They also provide therapy to patients with long term respiratory problems. Job opportunities for respiratory therapists are not as plentiful as for their colleagues on the physical side. Alaska does not employ a large number of respiratory therapists, so the number of openings which occur is limited. This is, however, generally an area with opportunities. The demand is not steady but comes in spurts.

Medical Technologist

Medical technologists perform a variety of laboratory tests in hospitals and supervise other laboratory staff. It is a growing occupation and employment opportunities do exist, particularly in the large hospitals. Medical technologists require four years of formal education.

Dietician/Nutritionist

Dieticians working in health care facilities ensure that patients receive the correct nutrition to maintain or improve their health. Many of the smaller facilities employ only a part-time dietician while the larger ones may have one or two. The total number of jobs in this area is few, which means openings are generally rare. There is not a great deal of turnover, but openings may occur because of growth. A person with patience, and a heart set on being a dietician may eventually secure a position in this field in the larger urban centers.

Pharmacist

The pharmacist prepares and dispenses drugs and medicine prescribed by doctors. There is no real shortage of pharmacists in Alaska, which is probably because there are many areas in the rest of the nation with an oversupply. In Alaska, it appears that there is a more balanced situation with some shortages in smaller communities and some demand for relief pharmacists.

Technician

There is a wide variety of technicians who work in hospitals. A partial list includes medical labs, radiologic, surgical, EKG, emergency medical, and biological technicians. With the exception of the medical technicians there are very few jobs in these fields. Hospitals in Alaska have little problem finding the necessary technicians as a slight oversupply exists. This is particularly true where no formal education is required because it creates a large supply of applicants. In other cases two years or less of formal

education is required to become a technician. Due to turnover and growth opportunities will occur in these fields but most likely it will be a matter of being in the right place at the right time to land one of these jobs.

Medical Records Technician

A medical records technician or clerk maintains the medical records of patients, compiles statistics, and transcribes and codes medical information. Many of the facilities in Alaska do not have certified medical record technicians, but instead train their employees on-the-job. A person who has gone through a two year medical records technician program would find good opportunities in Alaska. In larger facilities, good opportunities for advancement are found.

Major Education and Training Opportunities

Education and training needs vary from occupation to occupation, but most health care jobs require formal education ranging from several months to a decade. Many jobs require a degree or certificate from an accredited school. In Alaska, education and training opportunities are provided through the University of Alaska system including the campuses in Fairbanks and Anchorage, its 11 community colleges throughout Alaska, correspondence courses and Rural Education Centers. Although education opportunities may not be available in your local area or in state, credits completed through local programs may be transferred to other Alaskan schools or to outside colleges and universities which provide the appropriate education and training.

Qualified Alaskan residents may take advantage of various financial aid schemes and other assistance programs. The WICHE Exchange Program (Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education) helps Alaska residents obtain access to professional education not available in the state. Participants pay a reduced out of state tuition. The state reimburses the participating institution where the WICHE student enrolls for the non-resident portion of the tuition plus a portion of the institution's operating cost. The student does not receive any direct payment. For more information contact the Alaska Commission on Postsecondary Education, Pouch FP, Juneau, Alaska 99511.

The WAMI Program (Washington, Alaska, Montana, and Idaho) provides the residents of these states the opportunity to attend medical school at the University of Washington. This program will be discussed in more detail in part II of this series when job opportunities for physicians will be reviewed.

Traineeships

The Alaska Native Health Care Program through the University of Alaska Rural Education Centers provides short-term traineeship programs for minority high school and college students pursuing a career in medicine. For more information contact the Office of Personnel Management with the federal government or local Public Health Service Facility.

COSTEP (Commissioned Officer Training and Exchange Program) provides the qualified college nurse and physician student subsidized education in exchange for service with the Corps of Public Health Service as commissioned officers. For more information contact the Office of Personnel Management with the federal government or local Public Health Service Facility

The military also provides some training opportunities for various technical fields. Nurses, doctors and other professionals must have credentials before enlistment. For more information contact your local armed forces recruiter.

Nurses

Because nurses duties vary in scope, educational requirements also vary. Minimal education and training are required for nurse aides while a minimum of an associate degree is required for RNs.

Nurses Aide: Classes which may prepare a person to be a nurse's aide are available at Anchorage Community College but no formal education is available. The nurse's aide experience is valuable as a first step in a nurse's career.

Licensed Practical Nurses: The Licensed Practical Nurse candidate may obtain training at Anchorage Community College (ACC) and on a rotating basis between Juneau, Ketchikan, Sitka and Kuskokwim Community Colleges. Prerequisite courses are available through the community colleges, correspondence courses and Rural Education Centers. The training involves 3 semesters. Two semesters at the community college closest to your home and one semester at ACC.

Registered Nurse: There are various levels of training for the RN student. The associate, baccalaureate, masters and doctorate degree levels. All except the doctorate degree are available in state. The associate degree program is available at 4 of the 11 community colleges. Summer course work and internship are required at the ACC campus. The diploma program requires 24 to 30 months, but may require three academic years to complete the course of study. After receiving a diploma the graduate is prepared to successfully complete the state licensing exam to practice as a

registered nurse. Statewide accessibility of this program is good. Community college campuses may not offer the complete program but do offer many general education requirements. Other nursing electives are offered via audio or teleconferencing.

The baccalaureate nurse requires 4 years of college. Programs in Alaska have been available since 1968 through a cooperating agreement between the University of Alaska at Anchorage and the Alaska Methodist University. In 1976 the University of Alaska became the sole provider of the degree. The Baccalaureate Degree program requires four academic years to complete the generic course of study. Applicants must meet the entrance requirements of the university as well as those of the nursing program. On average 90 openings occur each year at UAA School of Nursing. Competition is keen for openings. Prerequisites for the general education portion may be taken through the nearest community college, correspondence courses, or the University of Alaska at Fairbanks. The Fairbanks campus also provides assistance for students interested in attending an out-of-state school through the WICHE program. The UA Anchorage campus also provides a masters program. Nurses in this program have the opportunity to specialize and gain additional leadership skills. The WICHE program also offers assistance for those students wishing to attend a masters or doctorate degree program at an out-of-state school.

Summary of Nursing Programs by School

	RNs			LPN	Nurse's Aide
	Masters	Baccalaureate	Associate		
U of A	*	*			
ACC				*	*
Fairbanks			*		
Juneau				*	
Ketchikan				*	
Sitka			*	*	
Kodiak			*		
Kuskokwim				*	

Therapist

Educational opportunities for physical and respiratory therapists and therapist assistants are limited. There are also no in state educational programs available for students interested in occupational or physical therapist assistant. Prerequisite courses may be taken in local schools and transferred to out-of-state programs. Many therapist assistants receive on-the-job training.

The University of Alaska in Fairbanks offers the most complete program in the state for students interested in a four-year physical therapist

program. The Fairbanks campus offers a 2-year bachelor's degree program. The state has an agreement with the University of Washington, which allows Alaskan students to compete for several class positions preferentially available to them. Many prerequisite courses may be taken at local community colleges and transferred to out-of-state schools through the WICHE program. Currently there are no respiratory therapist programs available in state, however, qualified students may take advantage of several assistance programs including the WICHE program.

Medical Technologist and Laboratory Technician

Anchorage Community College provides a two-year program for individuals interested in medical laboratory work. A certificate is given upon completion and the graduate is eligible to take the National Registry Exam.

The University of Alaska at Fairbanks provides a 4 year program for medical technologist. The participant attends the last year at the University of Washington.

Other Educational Opportunities

A Medical Assistant program is available through Anchorage Community College. This two year program teaches skills including both secretarial and clinical tasks.

Other opportunities are primarily limited to out-of-state programs, although some of the prerequisite courses may be taken at Alaskan schools. Financial aid and other assistance programs are available to give Alaskan residents opportunities to obtain the education they want.

For anyone interested in more information, feel free to contact Alaska Department of Labor, 3301 Eagle Street, Anchorage, Alaska 99501, telephone (907) 264-2400. We recommend a publication by the Bureau of Labor Statistics titled *Occupational Outlook Handbook* and the career information system AKCIS (Alaska Career Information Service) available at local school districts, community colleges, the University of Alaska and Job Service.
