

## JOB OPPORTUNITIES IN ALASKA'S HEALTH CARE INDUSTRY PART II

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**H**ealth care is presently one of the most dynamic industries in the nation. It has caused so much excitement that Wall Street speculators refer to it as the "health care boom". This excitement has come as a result of new technology, new ways of delivering health care, heightened health consciousness among the population, an emphasis on preventative medicine, changing demographics, and the creation of new health care occupations. Alaska is playing a part in these changes, which are not only taking place in the State's urban areas but are being felt in many of the rural areas of the State.

This article is Part II of a two-part series on employment opportunities in Alaska's health care industry. Part I (December 1983 issue of *Alaska Economic Trends*) focused on the opportunities in hospitals, acute care, and long term health care facilities (nursing, mental health, and the handicapped). Part II will emphasize health occupations found in noninstitutional health care facilities, such as clinics, private practices, and a variety of other out patient health centers. These would include private (profit and nonprofit) and government sponsored medical centers. In some cases the occupations discussed can be found in both institutional and noninstitutional health care settings and have already been covered in Part I.

In 1983 there were approximately 4,000 jobs in this sector of the health care industry. This is more than double the number present a decade earlier. Employment in this industry has grown more rapidly than overall employment in the both the U.S. and the Alaskan economy. There were approximately 573 health care establishments in Alaska in 1983 providing outpatient health care. They varied from a physician's private practice to large clinics, birthing centers, or drop in emergency centers. Some health establishments, such as birthing centers and drop in emergency centers, were nonexistent five years ago in Anchorage. Outpatient surgery is also growing in Alaska. It is estimated that 40% of all surgery may eventually be performed outside of the hospital.

Some of the occupations are also relatively new, such as the nurse practitioner. In 1980 there were 16 nurse practitioners in Alaska and today there are 73. The growth rate of nurse practitioners is no exception. The number of physician's assistants have more than doubled during the past three years and the number of physicians has grown by more than 100. The demand for people with health care skills definitely exists. The supply of people with these skills varies and this is, ultimately, what determines whether job opportunities for new entrants in the field will exist.

## Major Job Opportunities

As in any field, job opportunities in health care are determined by the supply of and demand for people with particular skills. Supply and demand for employment in Alaska's health care industry is influenced by fluctuations in economic activity, population changes, labor force characteristics, health care funding, replacement needs, locally available training 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, the number of older people is increasing, insurance coverage is more widespread, and health care consciousness has risen. In addition, increased government and native corporation health care funding has increased the demand for health care by residents in the rural portions of the state. Growth of this industry in Alaska is part of a nationwide trend. According to a recent U.S. Department of Labor publication "...health care will continue to be an expanding field of work into the 1990's. Reflecting growth in expenditures for health services, occupations in the field will be among the fastest growing." Even if little growth were to occur, replacement needs create opportunities. The industry lends itself to high turnover in some 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 servicemen.

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 but for many occupations in this industry the necessary education must be acquired outside Alaska. During recent years the number of health personnel has grown rapidly, but geographic distribution remains a problem. Health workers are concentrated in the heavily populated and prosperous areas. Although health care is improving in rural areas because of government and private programs, many areas do not have the population base or services to support many of the desired medical services.

Given expansion of the industry and turnover, good job opportunities exist in many of the health fields in Alaska. There are shortages of skilled personnel for some health occupations in the industry while other occupations are in a balanced or slight over supply situation. 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 there will likely be an over supply in Alaska. The job opportunities for all occupations represented in this industry are different. These differences will be discussed in the remainder of the article.

## Dental Occupations

**Dentist:** Job opportunities for dentists has been very good in the state, particularly in the urban areas. However, in the larger urban areas, such as Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau the demand/supply situation has improved causing increased competition. In the smaller yet growing communities, there is stronger demand than supply, but in many cases the population base is too small to warrant a full time position, particularly for specialized practices such as orthodontics or oral surgery. The rural portions of the state are experiencing a similar phenomenon where there may exist a strong demand for dental services but the population base and support industries do not exist to support a dentist. It is estimated by the Alaska Dental Association that a population of 2,000 is needed to support a full time dentist. The dental needs in the rural areas are being met through various programs by the U.S. Public Health Service.

Nationally, dental school enrollment has grown in recent years, and the number of new dentists is expected to shift from a balance situation to a slight oversupply in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Because of the recent increase in competition and the increasing cost of opening a practice, new dentists are forming group practices or may work for a dentist until they can gain a grubstake to start their own practice. Also a new developing trend is for dentists to become more generalized instead of specialized, so the dentist can perform more duties in light of increased competition.

**Dental Hygienist:** Generally, hygienists clean and polish teeth and instruct patients in proper oral hygiene. The outlook is good though competitive because of the rise in the number of graduates from schools of dental hygiene. Opportunities are best when looking for part time work. Full time work usually consists of working part time for several dentists.

Hygienists graduating from schools in Alaska have an advantage over hygienists new to the state because of the contacts the schools maintain to assist graduates in placement. The Anchorage Community College reports a very high placement rate. The hygienist relieves dentists of many routine tasks, thus "streamlining" the dentists operations. With mounting competition among dentists the need to streamline may diminish as the dentist perform the task themselves. Offsetting this is the trend of forming group practices which should result in additional jobs for hygienists. Also, the increasing social consciousness concerning oral hygiene is good news for the hygienist.

**Dental Assistant:** Dental assistant tasks range from attending the front desk to assisting the dentist in treatment. Employment outlook is good to excellent, especially for graduates of academic programs for dental assistants. Turnover plays a major role in creating a positive job outlook. Opportunities are not only good in urban centers, but also in the rural portions of the state through various Public Health programs.

## Medical Occupations

**Medical Doctors:** Doctors work in private practice, in public health programs and for the military. The employment outlook is favorable although the shortage of physicians, except for rural areas, is a thing of the past. The opportunities vary geographically within the state with the larger urban areas being more competitive than the smaller urban areas and rural regions. Some areas are unable to support a full time position. There is, however, a shortage of physicians specializing in obstetrics and to a lesser degree pediatrics.

Opportunities arise because of increasing population and replacement needs. However, in Alaska, replacement needs, particularly due to retirement, are low. Retirement in the lower 48 is a large factor in creating job opportunities, but in Alaska retirement is extremely low because the average age of physicians is very young. Nationally, medical school enrollment has increased in recent years causing increased competition among doctors. This in combination with sky rocketing cost of equipping a modern medical office have encouraged doctors, at an increasing rate, to turn to group practices. As one doctor stated, "the solo practice has priced itself out of the market."

**Nurse Practitioner:** The nurse practitioner is an R.N. who with additional training allows them to act more independently. Many work in doctors offices, their own office, clinics and in rural areas. This occupation is relatively new and has come about largely in response to a shortage of doctors in the 60's and 70's especially in rural areas of the state. Occupational opportunities are fairly good though only a small number of jobs exist in the state. Although the outlook is good it will depend to a large extent upon the use of nurse practitioners by doctors to streamline their offices. The expected oversupply of doctors in the future may limit the opportunities. Another factor for growth is the extent they will be used in the rural areas of the state.

**Physician Assistant:** The physician assistant (P.A.) came into being in the 1960's, when doctors were in short supply. The idea was to use a number of Medical Corpsmen, trained in the Vietnam conflict, to help solve the medical services shortage. Additional training enables these medics and other medically trained people to become P.A.'s. The demand/supply situation is balanced but the increased use by physicians and their use in rural areas could brighten the outlook. On the other hand the increased number of doctors could lead to lower patient loads for physicians thus lessening the demand for P.A.'s. Sparsely populated areas will always have trouble attracting full-time physicians and the P.A. services in those areas will remain an important contribution to health care.

**Paramedic:** The job outlook is very competitive for paramedics because of the large number of people that find it an attractive occupation and the

relatively small number of jobs. The person with paramedic training will have an advantage over a nonparamedic in some job openings, particularly at remote sites.

**Medical Assistant:** Medical assistants work for physicians in capacities ranging from reception to preparing medical records and performing some examinations. In many offices they are the "Jack-of-all-trades". Job outlook is good for both part time and full time positions. Job openings occur due to turnover, which is fairly high, and the arrival of new doctors to the state. Some physicians will provide training while others like some type of experience such as nursing or graduation from a formal medical assistant program.

**Health Aide:** The health aide is a unique occupation to Alaska's health care. The health care aide must be a local person of a predominately native village who is chosen by the community. The aide performs examinations, treats emergencies, dispenses medication, and handles a number of other health care needs of the local residents. Formal training is provided and physician supervision is available via radio. Job opportunities across the state are good to excellent. Turnover is high due to a very heavy work load and being on call 24 hours a day.

**Medical Social Worker:** Social workers are community and individual trouble shooters. Through direct counseling or referral to other services they help individuals, families, and groups cope with personal problems. Some may specialize in medical health or alcohol and drug abuse. Job outlook varies depending on the geographic region of the state. A shortage exists in some rural areas and is balanced to oversupply in the urban communities. The outlook is competitive in Anchorage as there are more job openings in Anchorage because of the size of the community. The outlook depends on the amount of financial aid from governmental units. One way to gain entry is to volunteer with an agency or take a clerical position while waiting for social work positions to become available.

**Optometrist:** Optometrists examine eyes and prescribe corrective lenses or treatment to protect and improve vision. The demand/supply situation is balanced edging towards oversupply in Alaska, particularly in Anchorage. A recent influx of optometrists to the state has caused this fairly competitive situation. Nationally, the outlook is fair with the expected number of graduates from the nation's 16 schools of optometry to be roughly equal to the number of positions that arise from growth in demand for vision care and replacement needs due to turnover and retirement.

**Optician:** Opticians fit and adjust eyeglasses and/or contact lenses according to prescription written by an Optometrist or Ophthalmologist. They do not examine eyes or prescribe treatment. The job outlook is competitive with a slight oversupply of opticians, particularly in Anchorage. Prospects for growth are tied to local population growth in various

areas of the state. Training and knowledge of the latest technologies is important to establish a successful practice. Also to be competitive an optician should be certified in eye glasses and contact lenses. Nationally, the long term outlook is good due to a growing and aging population. Older persons require more vision care. Also increased public awareness of good eyesight combined with increased coverage of services under insurance programs will increase demand for opticians.

**Chiropractor:** Chiropractic is a system of treatment based on the manual manipulation of parts of the body, especially the spinal column. A recent influx of chiropractors into the state in the last three years has caused a balanced to oversupply situation, particularly in Anchorage. Demand for chiropractors is related closely to public acceptance of the profession which has increased over the years. Enrollments in chiropractor colleges have grown dramatically in recent years which is likely to cause more competition. Because of increased competition the clinic setting and group practices are on the rise.

### **Training and Educational 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 Alaska residents may take advantage of various financial aid 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 nonresident 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 99811.

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 the local Public Health Service facility.

**COSTEP** (Commissioned Officer Student 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 the 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.

**Dentist:** To become a dentist, three years of college, and in most cases an undergraduate degree, is a prerequisite. Some emphasis should have been placed on the sciences in the undergraduate course of study. It is important to perform well on the undergraduate level as entry into a dentistry school can be very competitive. Dental school will typically last 4 years. The closest program to Alaska is at the University of Washington.

**Dental Assistant:** The Anchorage Community College has a 2 semester program and 6 weeks of practicum to become a certified dental assistant. One semester of prerequisite work is also necessary, which can be fulfilled elsewhere. An Associate degree is also available.

**Dental Hygienist:** The Anchorage Community College offers an Associate degree in dental hygiene. Some of the precourse work may be taken on campuses elsewhere in the state. The total program, including 1 year of prerequisite classes, lasts approximately three years.

**Medical Doctor:** In almost all cases four years of undergraduate school is necessary before entering medical school. Regardless of what a persons undergraduate degree is, it is imperative to achieve very high academic standings. One year of biology and physics, and one and one half years of chemistry is often a prerequisite. This training can be obtained at any of the University of Alaska four-year campuses. Alaska does have a medical school program known as the WAMI program (Washington, Alaska, Montana, and Idaho). The state of Alaska buys ten medical school positions at the University of Washington Medical School for state residents. If accepted into this program, the student spends his first year of medical school at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, and the remaining three years at the University of Washington. The student's clinical work can be performed in Anchorage and Ketchikan during the last 2 years of medical school. Once medical school is completed, three more years of residency is typically necessary to become a practicing doctor. The WAMI program is highly competitive. In this year's program there were 57 applicants for 10 positions. A person can, of course, apply to any of the other medical schools throughout the country.

**Nurse Practitioner:** A person must first be a registered nurse (see December *Alaska Economic Trends*). A Master level nurse practitioner program is

available at the University of Alaska, Anchorage. This program requires a person to have a Bachelor's degree in nursing before being accepted. There are programs elsewhere in the country which will accept RN's without a Bachelor's degree. These type of programs are being phased out, and the Master route is becoming more popular.

**Physicians Assistant:** Two years of college training, and/or 2 years of health related experience is usually a prerequisite before being admitted into a formal physicians' assistant program. A Bachelor's degree is sometimes necessary and is becoming necessary in more programs. The programs vary from one to four years. The more health experience and college the better because the competition to enter these programs is keen.

**Paramedic:** A person must first be a certified Emergency Medical Technician to qualify as a paramedic candidate. This requires that a person completes the 81 hour program designed by the U.S. Department of Transportation. Training is available through health departments, volunteer fire departments, emergency medical clinics, and other volunteer groups. To qualify to become a paramedic, a person must attend a paramedic school outside of the State. This program typically lasts from six months to a year. The closest program is at the University of Oregon, Portland.

**Health Aide:** Health aides are in a unique position as they are chosen for the jobs before they are trained. The overall basic training period can take up to 18 months with a mix of practical and formal training provided; most of it taking place in the village. Training is, however, continuous throughout an aide's career.

**Medical Assistant:** Medical assistants obtain formal training at programs which last from 6 months to a 2 year Associate degree. Some medical offices will provide on-the-job training. The Anchorage Community College has a 2 year Associate degree program.

**Medical Social Worker:** Training for a medical social worker is varied. This is particularly true for social workers in the mental health fields. There are social workers with no formal training and there are many with Masters degrees. On the physical health side, a Bachelor and Master degree is usually necessary, but in mental health social work there is a real variety of requirements. There is a similar program for social aides as there is for health aides. There are Associate, Bachelor, and Master degree programs in Alaska. ACC and TVCC have Associate degree programs in social work and related fields. The University of Alaska Anchorage has the only accredited Bachelor of Social Work program. The University of Alaska Fairbanks does have a BA degree in Sociology, with an emphasis in social work, and hopes to have an accredited program within the year. Fairbanks also has a Master level program in community counseling.

For a person who wishes to pursue social work as a career, it is recommended to attend a Bachelor or Master level program. Without these credentials, a very large percentage of the job opportunities in this field will be beyond a person's reach.

**Optometrist:** A college degree, with an emphasis in the sciences, is almost always a prerequisite before attending an optometry school. The University of Alaska, Fairbanks has a three year preoptometry course of study. In rare cases a person can attend optometry school after two years of college. Competition is stiff to enter optometry school and its duration is four years. There is no optometry school in Alaska. The closest school is the University of California at Berkeley.

**Optician:** Alaska has a 3 year apprenticeship program under a certified optician. One can attend an optician school for an Associate degree (2 years) and work under an optician for a year to be certified. The Associate degree route is recommended because a graduate of one of these programs will have a variety of skills.

**Chiropractor:** A person typically needs a minimum of two years of college work, with an emphasis in the sciences, before attending a four year chiropractic college. The prechiropractic course work can be taken on many of Alaska's college campuses. There is no chiropractic college in Alaska. The closest college is located in Portland, Oregon.

As the health care field continues to expand, new occupations and nontraditional occupations will continue to grow. The changes mean increased and improved care for both the rural and urban areas. For additional information about medical and other occupations contact the Alaska Department of Labor, Research and Analysis.