

## Finding opportunity in health care

By Tom Murphy - AP Business Writer | Posted: Tuesday, November 3, 2009 12:00 am

Many people who have lost jobs to the recession may find a cure for unemployment in the health care field.

The need for specialty nurses, therapists and technicians of all kinds has stayed strong. Recruiters say health care reform could trigger even more growth.

Meanwhile, the Obama administration touts health care as one of the industries that will drive a jobs recovery.

But all this doesn't add up to easy opportunity. Many health care jobs require applicants to go back to school, receive some sort of certification and deal with at least a temporary pay cut.

Michelle Vesey walked away from a \$65,000-a-year job to return to school full-time to become a nurse. The 47-year-old Inkster, Mich., resident took a buyout from Ford Motor Co. in 2007 and is living off a small stipend until she completes her degree in 2011.

"Let's just say I was in the black before I started to do this, and I've seen nothing but red since," she said.

Here are some keys to finding work in health care:

### **WHERE ARE THE JOBS?**

Demand is strong in physical and occupational therapy. People who work in these areas help patients recover following a hospital stay or take care of themselves.

Bob Livonius, CEO of Medfinders, a health care staffing and recruiting company, said he sees a need for certified nursing assistants, home health aides and personal companions who work in home care because that's now the "preferred environment for people to age."

The much-reported nursing shortage eased somewhat during the recession as retired nurses returned to work and part-timers switched to full-time status. But there's still a staffing deficit in specialty areas like intensive care units and emergency rooms.

Unfortunately, there's also a nursing school faculty shortage.

"The demand to get into nursing is so high, and yet there's such a bottleneck in the education system," said Susan Nowakowski, CEO of the San Diego-based staffing firm AMN Healthcare. "You may have to wait two to four years, and your grades better be pretty darn good."

Not all the health care jobs involve working with patients. Billions of dollars in economic stimulus money have been set aside for upgrading electronic medical records and health care technology. That bodes well for people who already have accounting or information technology experience.

"The good news is people who have skills in other areas can quickly adapt to this," Livonius said.

## WHAT ABOUT PAY?

Compensation depends on training levels, need and location, among other factors. For example, MRI technicians need six months to a year of training and state certification. Starting salaries then can range around \$55,000.

A certified nurse aide can make between \$21,000 and \$31,000 annually, while an oncology staff nurse can earn as much as \$73,000 a year, according to Medfinders, which is based in Arlington, Texas.

The more education you have, the more you're likely to earn. Licensed practical nurses, or LPNs, receive about two-thirds of the pay a registered nurse gets, Nowakowski said. LPNs generally need up to 18 months of training from a technical or vocational school, while registered nurses need an associate's or bachelor's degree.

Many employers offer tuition assistance or training to advance your career, said Maria Benedetti, vice president of recruitment for Hospital Corp. of America, which operates 163 hospitals in 20 states.

Aside from education and training, many positions also have certification requirements that vary by state.

## HOW CAN I TELL IF HEALTH CARE IS RIGHT FOR ME?

William Striggles worked 31 years for Ford Motor Co. before he took a buyout in 2007 and returned to school to become a registered nurse.

"I found out I wasn't as tough as I thought I was," the 52-year-old former industrial electrician said.

The Detroit resident has worked with patients that had a year or so to live.

He's cared for people suffering from pain that cannot be dulled by drugs.

"You want to help everybody, but if you're unable to help somebody, it really hurts if you're really connected to what you do," he said.

Recruiters say people skills are a must in health care, since hospitals and other facilities are increasingly stressing patient satisfaction. The flexibility to work on evenings, weekends and holidays also is important.

Patience is another must. Julia Clement-Voigt needed five years of night classes to bulk up on science before she entered nursing school. She was a sales agent and designer for a custom cabinet and closet company when she decided on the career switch.

"Things like DNA had been discovered since I was in college the first time," said the 47-year-old Indianapolis resident, who has a bachelor's degree in French.

## WHY HAS THE HEALTH CARE INDUSTRY STAYED STRONG?

Health care spending per person grows about 6 percent year, said Mark Pauly, an economics professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School. More spending means more jobs.

"One way to say it is one American's health care spending is another American's wages or income," he said. "We don't buy much of it from foreigners, after all."

## **WHAT WILL HEALTH CARE REFORM BRING?**

Congress is trying to find ways to cover the uninsured and lower health care costs. No one knows yet what the legislation will ultimately look like.

If reform slows total spending, that could hurt job growth overall, Pauly said.

But opportunity could spike in some areas if reform helps cover more uninsured people. That could boost demand for preventive or early diagnostic care and in turn, the need for nurses and primary care doctors.

"It could be a pretty abrupt and strong increase in demand on a system where there are already shortages in all these areas," Nowakowski said.