Where the Jobs Are--Health Care

By Roxanne Nelson

• From high-tech to high-touch, explore a world of career opportunities in medicine and health.

Health care is a hot career field, your guidance counselor may keep saying. He or she might be encouraging you to check it out as one option for your future. But just how hot is health care?

About 14 million people now work in health-care jobs, according to government statistics. In the next decade, the number of new jobs will grow by about 3 million - more than in any other industry - and represent about 20 percent of all new U.S. jobs. Although no job or career is completely recession-proof, people will always need health care.

All in a Day's Work

Health-care jobs of every kind can be fulfilling. They require different skill sets and kinds of knowledge, and they offer a wide range of ways to help people.

In the hospital - and out of it. Only about a third of people employed in health care actually work in hospitals. The rest work in doctors' offices, clinics, laboratories, long-term care facilities, and corporate offices. Some even work from home.

From people to paperwork. Many healthcare professionals work directly with people but not necessarily in clinical settings. For example, the work of opticians, physical and occupational therapists, speech pathologists, pharmacists, ultrasound technicians, and mental health counselors is considered hands-on. People behind the scenes are as important as those on the front lines, from those who work with computers (medical information) to those who work with words (medical transcription).

Education varies. People who want to be doctors can plan to spend about a decade attending college and med school and getting further training. Some health-care jobs require only a two-year college degree, a certification course, or on-the-job training. Some positions, such as dental assistant or pharmacy technician, provide basic training and experience and serve as stepping-stones to more highly skilled and higher-paying jobs.

Hands-on Health Care

Think health-care jobs, and undoubtedly, medical doctor comes to mind. In a nutshell, physicians diagnose illnesses, prescribe medications, and provide treatment for people suffering from injury or disease. Some
physicians also conduct research, teach at universities, or work for public health agencies.

Being a physician is interesting and challenging: No two days are alike. Keep in mind that a doctor's work is often intense and requires more training than most other jobs. But the career path can be exciting and rewarding and includes many different specialties, such as pediatrics, dermatology (skin care), oncology (cancer care), and surgery.

After doctors, nurses probably get the most recognition. It's easy to see why: Registered nurses make up the largest single group of health-care professionals. Like doctors, they can choose very different specialties. Some nurses help with research on new drugs, others work in schools or nursing homes, and still others focus their efforts on people who have diabetes or mental health conditions.

Physicians and nurses aren't the only people who work with patients. Physician assistants, optometrists, acupuncturists, chiropractors, and other professionals all provide hands-on health care.

All About Allied Health

Most jobs in the field - 200 different types - fall into a category called allied health providers. Allied health jobs are usually organized into two large categories: technicians/assistants and therapists/technologists. Within each of those large groups are many different job descriptions.

Technicians perform procedures, such as drawing blood for lab tests or getting patients set up for X-rays, and work under the supervision of technologists or therapists. Jobs in this category include physical therapy assistant, medical laboratory technician, radiology technician, occupational therapy assistant, and recreational therapy assistant.

Therapists and technologists have more education, training, and responsibilities. They can work more independently and can make diagnoses and treatment decisions. Health care occupations in this category include occupational therapist, audiologist, dental hygienist, and physical therapist.

Even More to Explore

In addition to physicians, nurses, technicians, therapists, and technologists, there are healthcare professions that don't fall into defined categories. Some work with patients in indirect ways, and still others focus on administration.

Health-care administrators. These professionals work behind the scenes and keep hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, and physicians' offices running smoothly.

Indirect patient interaction. Pharmacists, genetic counselors, and nutritionists work with patients in less hands-on settings than clinical health-care workers do. They offer evaluations and consultations, teach, and provide support for their clients.

Think About It...

What skills are needed to work in the health care field? How could you develop them?

Francesca Jackson, 15, spent a week of her summer at the SCRUBS Health Career Exploration Camp at Bon Secours St. Francis Hospital, in Charleston, S.C. She wants to be an anesthesiologist - a doctor who helps patients sleep comfortably during surgery. At the camp, Francesca studied CPR and first aid, shadowed professionals on the job, and spent a lot of time in the hospital's neonatology unit with newborn babies. She continues to volunteer in the hospital's pain management department, where she works along with anesthesiologists. Camps for health-care careers take place all over the country. Talk to your school's career guidance office for more information.

Why I Love My Job: Six Health-Care Pros Talk About Their Work
**Nurse**

After working as an aeromedical evacuation technician in the Air Force Reserve, Dave Grzechowiak found himself drawn to nursing. He calls it "a unique field [in which] you can really connect with your patients and make a difference." Grzechowiak is now studying nursing at the University of California, Los Angeles. He says he thought about becoming a doctor, "but I felt it was too much about treating a disease or condition rather than providing direct care to the patient."

**Optometrist**

Optometrists examine eyes, diagnose and treat eye diseases and disorders, prescribe glasses or contact lenses, and perform minor surgeries. They don't go to medical school but do spend four post-college years at optometry school. Optometry is a great profession, says Michigan-based optometrist Barbara Horn, O.D. "You have so many options open to you. The most typical option is practicing," she says. Just recently, Horn treated a person who complained of a vision problem, but the patient's symptoms pointed to something more serious. "I referred her for a brain scan because all testing pointed to a possible brain tumor that needed immediate attention," Horn explains. Other options include teaching, conducting research, and working as an eye-care consultant.

**Physical Therapist**

Allie Wehunt found physical therapy a natural extension of her interests. "I love exercise and grew up [playing] sports," she says. "I had a sports-related injury, and physical therapy really helped me heal." Wehunt, a graduate student at the Medical University of South Carolina, points out that physical therapists specialize in the movement of the body. They help people recover from injuries, but they also help prevent injuries in the first place. "We work in a lot of different settings, and the job market is wide open," adds Wehunt.

**Physician Assistant**

A physician assistant (PA) is licensed to practice medicine - diagnosing health problems and prescribing medication - with a doctor's supervision. "I considered becoming a doctor," says Kim Zuber, PA-C, a PA based in Alexandria, Va. "But I didn't want to commit that many years to going to school [or] get locked into one specialty? She found that being a physician assistant gave her more flexibility, was better suited to her lifestyle, and let her directly care for patients. "I love being a PA," Zuber says. "It allows me to do something different every day...and I have made a difference in people's lives."

**Chiropractor**

Robert Hayden, D.C., Ph.D., of Griffin, Ga., spent 20 years as a critical-care nurse. Then he decided that he could offer more help to people as a chiropractor, a health-care professional who provides hands-on treatment for joint and spine problems. "It's a more holistic approach to health care and helping people," he says. "On an almost daily basis, I am able to help patients improve their mobility or relieve pain." With increasing public demand for alternative health care, job opportunities in chiropractic medicine are projected to grow.

**Pharmacist**

"Pharmacists are medication-use experts, and our number-one priority is education," says Jennifer Athay, Pharm.D. "We educate both patients and other health-care workers about the proper use of medication." Athay, who is director of student affairs at the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy, believes that pharmacy is a great career because of its diversity. "There are pharmacists in every area of health care," she says. "Many work out in the community pharmacy setting, but you can also work in research, drug development, hospital, and other health-care settings." The job comes with a lot of responsibility, she adds, and requires about six to eight years of training. A good way to check out the field, suggests Athay, is to begin working as a pharmacy technician. "That's what I did," she says. "It helped put me through school, and I received a lot of on-the-job training."

**Key Points**

2. Many different kinds of jobs are available in this industry.

3. Some health-care jobs involve patient care, while others are behind the scenes.

4. People who work in this field often describe their jobs as interesting and fulfilling.

**Critical Thinking**

What types of health careers, which aren't included in this article, can you identify?

**Extension Activity**

Help students determine what their skills and career interests are. Ask a school guidance counselor for help in developing a skills and interests itinerary for students to fill out. Then have them research what health-care jobs might be a good fit for them.

**Resources**

  www.stats.bls.gov/oco/home.htm

- Office of Science Education: LifeWorks
  www.science.education.nih.gov/lifeworks

**Scrubs, a Lab Coat, or a Suit and Tie?**

Directions: Read the article "Where the Jobs Are--Health Care." Then select a healthcare–related job that you'd like to learn more about. Using your library, the Occupational Outlook Handbook Web site (www.bls.gov/oco), and conversations with people in your community who have that job, fill out the questionnaire below.

Job Title: ________________________________________________

Duties: ________________________________________________

Type of Workplace: _____________________________________

Skills Required: _________________________________________

Education Required: _____________________________________

Pay Rate or Salary: ______________________________________

Job Outlook: ____________________________________________

What Appeals to Me: ______________________________________

What Doesn't Appeal to Me: ________________________________

What Else I'd Like to Learn: ______________________________

After answering the questions, you'll probably have a better idea whether this job interests you as a possible career. You can use this model to research other jobs in health care or other fields.
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