

Health Care Nursing Lots of Growth, Opportunity

By John Nilon

As good luck would have it, I recently had the opportunity to spend four days in Las Vegas. The lights, the shows, the restaurants, the stores and the gambling -- truly this is a city teeming with action.

I like it all with the possible exception of gambling. I am much fonder of a sure thing than I am of a gamble. Now, if I knew that a specific roulette table at a specific casino, at a specific date and time, was going to hit 18 Red with a payoff of 35 to 1, I would bet it all. Who wouldn't wager everything and more with that information?

Wouldn't you also like to take the gamble out of which career is going to hit the jackpot? As you bet your own future, it is best to know which are the high-growth, high-promotion jobs. Today, as is the recent theme of this column, I will talk about another high-growth industry in our community: health care.

Health care offers several advantages to the job seeker: It is a fast-growing field, offers lots of entry-level positions, provides above-average pay, has plenty of room for advancement and, for many, is personally satisfying work. The health care industry is rich and deep in its variety of opportunities and with its vast career ladder, or career lattice as I like to call it, one can climb up and transfer over to a different field. Typically, these job opportunities can take this form:

* A position such as home health care aide can serve as the first step on the ladder. This is an entry-level position in which the employee attends to the basic needs of a sick or frail patient. Home health care aides work in a patient's home providing one-on-one care, which

can include cooking and cleaning. Generally, only a high school diploma is required for the job. The pay usually starts at minimum wage, \$6.75 an hour. Home health care aides are expected to have a 35 percent job-growth rate over the next two years.

* Certified nursing assistant, the next step on the ladder, requires certification. These certificates can be obtained by completing a four-month class at Bakersfield College or Bakersfield Adult School. CNAs work in convalescent facilities where they care for several patients but are not responsible for cooking and cleaning. On average, the starting wage for CNAs in Bakersfield is about \$8 per hour with a 35 percent job growth rate.

* Like most positions in this field, medical assistant can be a starting point or a move up a rung on the health care ladder. Medical assistants generally learn their trade at a public or private college, or a trade school. Most programs last from seven to nine months, often including a one-month externship. While on the externship, the students gain valuable hands-on experience in a real-life setting -- an actual medical office. The students usually spend half their time in the "front office," where they learn the complexities of making appointments, billing and records maintenance. The rest of their time is spent in the "back office," an assignment that includes taking vital signs, charting, preparing patients and assisting the physician.

In Kern County, the number of Medical assistants is expected to grow by 29 percent through 2003 and have an average starting wage of \$8 per hour.

* It is at this point people often branch off into related careers such as pharmacy technician, dental assistant, X-ray technician, physical therapy aide, medical records clerk, chiropractic assistant or emergency medical technician, to name only a few. These

positions require specialized training programs that lead to a license or certificate. On average, these positions pay \$10 to \$13 per hour with a job growth rate near 30 percent.

* A licensed vocational nurse can be the next step on the ladder. It is necessary to attend college for as long as two years, earning an Associate of Arts degree, in order to become an LVN. In Bakersfield, entry-level LVNs earn about \$13 per hour with a projected job-growth rate of 15 percent.

* The next, but certainly not the final rung, on the medical care ladder is the bachelor of science degree in nursing, which is offered at Cal State Bakersfield and other colleges and universities. CSUB also offers graduate-level nursing and nurse practitioner training. State labor analysts are projecting there will be about 110 new nursing jobs in the county next year.

It may seem odd that there will be modest growth in nursing jobs at a time when nurses are being offered hefty signing bonuses. Bakersfield hospitals are static with regard to the size of the nursing staff, but spend a lot of time and money maintaining the existing numbers of nurses.

There are jobs all over the world and in unusual settings, such as colleges and law firms. The entry-level pay for nurses in Bakersfield is about \$20 per hour with an experienced nurse earning up to \$30 per hour, plus signing bonuses in the thousands.

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Please remember that this is intended to be a dialogue with the readers. I would be pleased to answer the questions that you have, so please feel free to contact me at AskJohn@co.kern.ca.us or AskJohn c/o ETR, 2001 28th St., Bakersfield, CA 93301. †

