



## remarks

**Which Specialty is in Greatest Demand? All of Them.** Physicians of all kinds will always be needed. To ensure personal career satisfaction and avoid regrets, choose a specialty based on your needs, not the going trend.

BY JAMES MERRITT



What area of medicine is the hottest right now? What specialty would I

choose if I were a medical student? I have spoken to hundreds of medical students, residents and new physicians over the last 20 years, and these are the two questions they inevitably ask me.

My answer, with minor qualifications, has not wavered in all that time. Choose the medical specialty that interests you the most, not the one for

which there appears to be a particular demand at the moment. Select the specialty you think you would be best at and find the most fulfilling. Because the fact is that virtually all types of physicians are in demand today. Physicians have been wanted and needed for years and they will be wanted and needed for years to come. Indeed, as I have said so many

times that it has practically become my mantra, "There is no such thing as an unemployed physician."

While this is obvious to me, medical students, residents and others can be excused if it is not obvious to them. For years, academic and government experts have been predicting a surplus of physicians. Only recently has this begun

to change. Last year a highly publicized study in the January/February edition of *Health Affairs* predicted a shortage of some 200,000 physicians by the year 2020 if current demographic and medical trends persist. Even the American Medical Association, which for many years supported predictions of a physician surplus, is changing its tune and conceding that shortages may exist in some specialties.

Why are physicians going to be in short supply? There are many contributing factors, ranging from new medical

**Sixty-three percent of hospitals of all sizes rated radiologists as "very difficult" to recruit—more than any other type of physician. It is ironic that radiology is one of the specialties medical students were discouraged from entering only a few years ago.**

*Continued*

## REMARKS

*Continued from previous page*

technologies to changing physician practice styles to the increasing number of women in medicine. The most telling, however, is the exploding demand for medical services being driven by an aging population committed to maintaining its high quality of life.

But enough about the past and the future. What types of physicians are being recruited today?

My firm recently conducted a survey of hospital administrators to find out.

What we learned is that the great majority of hospitals either are actively recruiting physicians now or plan to in the near future. Eighty-five percent of all hospitals surveyed indicated they are currently recruiting physicians to their service areas. Of those that are not, 56 percent plan on doing so within the next six months. Ninety-nine percent of hospitals of 101 to 200 beds said they are recruiting physicians, as did 96 percent of hospitals of 201 beds or more, while 78 percent of smaller hospitals of 100 beds or fewer indicated they are recruiting physicians.

These results may seem surprising as the general perception is that the greatest need for physicians is in the smaller, rural communities typically served by hospitals of 100 beds or fewer. However, with the contraction in the hospital market in recent years, there is a short supply of beds in many larger centers. In our experience, many larger facilities in urban areas are becoming more aggressive in expanding their plants and service lines to address growing demand, leading to a high rate of recruitment in urban facilities. In addition, with their larger staffs, urban hospitals have less stability and must continually recruit to replace retiring or departing physicians.

The survey also asked hospital administrators to indicate the types of

physicians they currently are recruiting. Specialties being recruited by a significant number of hospitals of all sizes include family practitioners (45%), internists (32%), orthopaedic surgeons (31%), general surgeons (27%), cardiologists (23%), and anesthesiologists (20%).

A significant number of larger hospitals (those with 201 beds or more) also are recruiting physicians in a variety of other specialties, including gastroenterologists (41%), neurologists (35%), hospitalists (33%), obstetrician/gynecologists (31%), urologists (31%), hematologists/oncologists (29%), rheumatologists (27%), dermatologists (25%), and radiologists (22%).

In short, both primary care physicians and specialists are being actively recruited by many hospitals. The difference is that hospitals are finding specialists to be difficult to recruit while primary care physicians are not so difficult to find. The survey asked hospital administrators to identify which types of physicians are the most difficult to recruit and which types are the least difficult. Sixty-three percent of hospitals of all sizes rated radiologists as “very difficult” to recruit—more than any other type of physician. It is ironic that radiology is one of the specialties medical students were discouraged from entering only a few years ago because some people believed there were too many radiologists. Other specialists rated as “very difficult” to recruit by a significant number of hospitals included orthopaedic surgeons (58%), anesthesiologists (49%), cardiologists (47%), rheumatologists (46%), pediatric sub-specialists (43%), urologists (42%), hematologists/oncologists (41%), dermatologists (41%), and obstetrician/gynecologists (37%).

By contrast, 68 percent of all respon-

dents rated family practitioners as “not particularly difficult” to recruit and 42 percent rated internists as “not particularly difficult” to recruit. Only 13 percent of responding hospitals rated family practitioners and internists as “very difficult” to recruit.

Our conclusion is that the demand for primary care physicians today and the available supply are in relative balance. There are plenty of openings, and generally (though not always) candidates to fill them. This is not the case in many specialties, however, where demand is acute but supply is limited.

Contrast this picture to the job market for most other professions today and physicians have a reason to smile about their choice of a career. The hurdles one must clear to become a physician are high, as are the burdens and responsibilities of being a doctor. But come rain or come shine, physicians are an indispensable part of our society, and that is something you can take to the bank now—and twenty years from now. ■

*James Merritt is the president of Merritt, Hawkins & Associates ([www.merrithawkins.com](http://www.merrithawkins.com)) a national physician search firm based in Irving, Texas. He can be reached at [jmerritt@mhagroup.com](mailto:jmerritt@mhagroup.com).*

**The comments in Remarks are solely those of the author and may or may not be shared by UO or its advertisers.**