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Introduction

Summary

This book is designed to serve many purposes to inform you about the field of allied health and the wealth of job opportunities it offers; to point you to educational programs, employers, and a host of other professional resources in your state; and to prepare you for two key examinations used by allied health schools nationwide. Here's a quick look at what lies ahead.

Allied health is a huge field, encompassing a wide range of career choices and all different types of people. In terms of employment growth, it's booming. The healthcare industry as a whole is expected to produce roughly 4 million more jobs by the year 2005. Added to the current employment level, that amounts to some 13 million people working to meet this country's healthcare needs. Only a small percentage of these workers will be the doctors, surgeons, and other professionals who have spent several years in medical school earning their right to practice. The vast majority will be working in the allied health occupations with the demand for their particular knowledge and skills resulting in double-digit, and in some cases triple-digit, job growth.

The allied health occupations are made up of professionals and paraprofessionals, assistants and aides, technologists and technicians, counselors and therapists, administrators and engineers. All of these occu-

pations involve providing some type of care or service either directly to patients, or on the behalf of patients, who may have any number of healthcare needs. Because the field combines such a diverse group of occupations, there's no single job description or set of professional standards that applies to each and every career. While you can count on having to meet certain guidelines with regard to education and training, the amount of time you'll have to invest to do so can extend from a few weeks to a few months to a few years. In many cases these guidelines are set by professional associations in the field. State and/or federal agencies typically regulate the practice of these occupations, having the final say on whether you've got the proper credentials for the job.

Of course, the choice of jobs is up to you. And that's where this book comes in. Its main purpose is to help you make an informed choice and take some practical steps toward your goals. Maybe you're interested in an allied health career, but what you know about the field is mostly limited to watching "ER" on Thursday nights. Maybe you already have some ideas about the kind of allied health career you'd like, but you want some information about the job prospects in your state and the professional requirements you'll have to meet. Or maybe you are already working in the field, but have decided to get some additional education to advance your career or move into a related occupation. Whatever stage you're at in planning your allied health career, this book can be an important resource.

Did You Know?

In the first chapter, you'll learn about the major trends that are driving change in the healthcare industry and creating enormous opportunity throughout the allied health field. For example, did you know that the "managed care" system we read so much about has elevated the importance of, and the need for, allied health workers? Are you aware that even though doctors aren't making many house calls these days, providing healthcare in the home is back in style thanks to skilled allied health workers? Have you heard that temp agencies have become a major source of employment for allied health workers? Chapter 1 describes these and other key trends, the variety of career choices available, the range of prospective employers, and what to expect with regard to education, licensing, and certification requirements for these careers.

Moving forward, the state-specific information you'll find in Chapter 2 is one of the most valuable features of this book. What are the fastest-growing allied health jobs right where you live? Where in your state can you get the education and training you'll need to qualify for these jobs? Who determines the testing standards and procedures to become certified or licensed to perform these jobs? What can you expect to earn? And where can you go to get hired? Chapter 2 highlights the hottest jobs and offers detailed facts about the government regulations, professional guidelines, and employment requirements involved in getting these jobs in your state. In addition, it directs you to accredited education programs and training sources, professional associations, government agencies, and potential employers statewide including hospitals, residential healthcare facilities, nursing homes, and home healthcare agencies.

Most of the remaining chapters in this book focus on test preparation for two examinations widely used by accredited allied health education programs across the country. At many schools, candidates for four-year or graduate degree programs for a range of allied health occupations must take the Allied Health Professions Admission Test (AHPAT). Similarly, the Allied Health Aptitude Test (AHAT) is often required for one- or two-year degree or certificate programs. Input

from educators and professionals in the field is used to determine the content of these exams. Both the AHPAT and the AHAT test for the basic level of knowledge, skills, and academic ability needed to succeed in a particular course of study within the allied health field.

The Bottom Line

The bottom line? In order to get into most allied health programs, you have to pass one of these two exams. The test-prep chapters in this book can help. You can use the exam planner to work out your best approach and structure your study time. You can learn how to overcome test anxiety, how to pace yourself through the test, whether it's good to guess when you're not sure of an answer, and other secrets of test success. Best of all, you can actually take some sample tests and find out beforehand how you're likely to fare on the real thing. Along with the sample tests are several instructional chapters aimed at specific sections of each exam, from reading comprehension and math to biology and chemistry. These chapters can help boost your knowledge in any sections where you may be weak, and reinforce your confidence in areas where your knowledge is strong.

Last but not least, the final chapter in this book links you to other valuable sources of information about allied health careers. This chapter introduces a network of resources nationwide, including educators, employers, government agencies, professional organizations, placement services, directories, and more. You could wind up using this particular chapter now and for years to come, whenever you're looking to get some career guidance, get some education and training, get a job, or get ahead in the job you've got.

Meanwhile, opportunity awaits. Keep reading.

Chapter 1

The Golden Age of Allied Health

Chapter Summary

This chapter presents an overview of the allied health industry what it is and where it's headed. It describes employment prospects, education and professional requirements, and major changes in the healthcare system as a whole that are expanding the role of the allied health professional.

Cost, demand, and technology. As any economist will tell you, when these three factors meet, changes occur. It happened to the automobile industry 70 years ago, to the computer industry 20 years ago. Now these three forces have descended upon the healthcare industry.

Like a lot of things, it starts with money. In this country, more than \$1 trillion and about 14 percent of our gross national product is spent on health care, by far the highest in the industrialized world. At the same time, nearly 35 million U.S. citizens do not have healthcare insurance. As a result, there is an industry-wide drive to contain the rising costs of healthcare services, as well as to extend these services to more people. For this to happen, the system as we know it will have to become more efficient, which should help lower the costs and thereby make healthcare services more accessible and affordable.

The people who will make this change possible are the allied health workers. Where do we find them? Everywhere in the healthcare system. They

perform a variety of roles, often working as part of a team to assist, support, and supplement the patient care provided by doctors and other medical professionals. The level of education, training, and other credentials they need depends on their particular occupation, and comes from many sources from colleges and vo-tech schools to government institutions and home healthcare agencies.

These are the people who keep the records that make up our medical history. They can be found assisting medical staff in doctors' offices and clinics, and assisting surgeons in the operating room. They are the physical therapists who diagnose and treat physical injuries, and the therapy assistants who oversee the rehabilitation plans those therapists prescribe. They counsel us on nutritional needs. They visit our workplaces to administer flu shots, or to reduce the risks of on-the-job injuries. They come to our homes to care for us through a recovery period, or to teach us how to live with a chronic medical condition.

This is why allied health workers are considered the frontline of the healthcare system. These people come into contact with the public constantly and provide an ever-widening array of services. How we, as a nation, come to view our healthcare system whether it's efficient and effective, whether it *works* will increasingly depend on our experiences with allied health workers.

"We all are pushing to achieve a philosophy of the right care at the right time for the right cost. We are shifting from inpatient to outpatient, from sickness to an emphasis on wellness," describes Richard K. Thomas, vice president of the Medical Research Services Group in Memphis, Tennessee, which does strategic planning and market research for healthcare companies. "We are coming into the Golden Age of allied health workers."

A Bright, Bright Future

One thing's for sure, the experts say the demand for health care is on the rise, making those who are qualified to provide that care a highly valuable commodity. The government's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reports that employment in health service industries through the year 2005 will grow at almost double the rate of all other (non-farm) wage and salary employment. In sheer numbers, about 9 million American workers are now employed in health services. By 2005, that number is expected to be at about 13 million an increase of nearly 4 million jobs.

Within the allied health field in particular, prospects are looking good. To give you an idea, consider the rate of employment growth projected by the BLS for nine leading allied health occupations:

| Occupation | % Job Growth 1990 to 2005 |
|--|------------------------------|
| Home health aides | 138% |
| Physical therapy assistants and aides | 93% |
| Physical therapists | 88% |
| Medical assistants | 71% |
| Radiologic technologists/ technicians | 63% |
| Medical record technicians | 61% |
| Occupational therapists | 60% |
| Speech/language pathologists & audiologists | 51% |
| Respiratory therapists | 48% |

That's the outlook for those at the top. But allied health embraces a wide range of careers: surgical technicians, dietitians, licensed practical nurses (LPNs), genetic counselors, and dental hygienists, to name just a few

ALLIED HEALTH: ON THE JOB

The complete list of allied health careers is long and varied. The responsibilities you'll have, and the skills you'll need, will depend on the career you choose. The occupations encompass a number of different medical disciplines and different levels of knowledge and expertise. In many you'll work directly with patients, others mostly in a lab setting. You may need to have a great bedside manner or aptitude for science and math or a knack for operating diagnostic equipment or certain artistic talents.

The snapshot job descriptions below will give you an idea of what's involved in some of the many careers available. In this wide open field, it's important to know what the various jobs entail so that you can decide the best match for your particular interests and abilities.

Art Therapists are trained in the fine arts and the behavioral sciences to develop rehabilitation programs that use art materials and techniques (such as painting, sculpting with clay, making crafts).

Audiologists test, diagnose, and treat people who have hearing and related problems.

Biochemists study and research the chemical composition of living things with regard to life processes such as metabolism, reproduction, growth, and heredity.

Biomedical Engineers use engineering skills and concepts to invent or improve devices, instruments, and substances used in treating medical problems (for example, pacemakers, ultrasound, artificial limbs).

Blood Bank Technologists are medical technologists who specialize in skills and knowledge needed to maintain a blood bank operation, such as drawing, classifying, testing, analyzing, and storing blood.

Cardiopulmonary Technologists conduct tests and evaluations related to the diagnosis and treatment of heart (cardiac) and lung (pulmonary) diseases and disorders.

Cardiovascular Technicians assist physicians and other medical personnel in diagnosing and treating medical problems related to the body's heart (cardiac) blood vessel (peripheral vascular) systems. (See also EKG Technicians.)

Chiropractors diagnose and treat medical problems related to the body's muscles

nervous, and skeletal systems, especially the spine.

Cytotechnologists prepare and analyze microscopic slides of body cell samples to detect abnormalities, particularly any cancerous growth.

Dance Therapists are trained in dance/movement, psychology, and physiology to treat and rehabilitate patients with emotional or physical disorders, or developmental disabilities.

Dental Assistants provide various patient care, laboratory, and office services to assist dentists in diagnosing and treating patients.

Dental Hygienists perform preventive dental procedures, including cleaning teeth and instruct patients on oral hygiene practices to prevent teeth and gum abnormalities or disease.

Dentists diagnose, prevent, and treat problems of the teeth and tissues of the mouth.

Dietitians plan nutrition programs and supervise meal preparation and service, often for large institutions such as hospitals, schools, nursing homes, and prisons.

continued on page 4

ALLIED HEALTH: ON THE JOB (cont.)

EEG Technologists conduct tests using EEG (electroencephalograph) equipment which records electrical impulses in the brain, to assist neurologists (physician who study the brain) in treating patients with neural disorders such as brain tumors, strokes, and Alzheimer's disease.

EKG Technicians are cardiovascular technicians who perform EKG (electrocardiogram) testing to record and monitor electrical impulses transmitted by the heart. (See also Cardiovascular Technicians.)

Genetic Counselors advise patients, often prospective parents, on matters relating to hereditary diseases and disorders such as Down's Syndrome, muscular dystrophy, and pre-birth spinal or organ malformations.

Licensed Practical Nurses provide basic nursing care (both medically related and nonmedical) for sick, injured, convalescing, and handicapped patients under the direction of physicians and registered nurses.

Medical Illustrators use artistic skills and medical and anatomical knowledge to create drawings, diagrams, models, and other graphic aids for use in medical research, publications, consultations, exhibits, teaching, and various communications media.

Nurse's Aides provide basic nonmedical care, supervised by nursing and medical staff, to patients confined to hospitals and nursing or residential care facilities (similar to Home Health Aides, but working in a clinical setting).

Optometrists diagnose and treat vision problems, for example, prescribing and fitting eyeglasses and contact lenses, and may provide basic care for eye disorders such as cataracts and glaucoma (unlike ophthalmologists, however, who are physicians specializing in the treatment of eye diseases and injuries).

Orthotists design, build, and fit devices to support weak body parts or correct physical defects, such as limb or spinal cord disorders stemming from cerebral palsy, polio, or a stroke. (See also Prosthetists.)

Pharmacists dispense drugs prescribed by physicians and other medical practitioners, advise about medications, and consult with physicians about the selection, dosages and effects of medications.

Podiatrists are doctors of podiatric medicine who diagnose and treat disorders,

diseases, and injuries of the foot and lower leg.

Prosthetists design, build, and fit artificial limbs (prostheses) for patients who lost part or all of their own limbs due to accident, illness, or a congenital condition. (See also Orthotists.)

Psychologists study human behavior and mental processes to understand, explain, and change people's behavior, often with an area of specialty such as clinical, developmental, organizational, or research psychology.

Recreation Therapists use games, sports, exercises, arts and crafts, and other recreational activities to treat patients with emotional, physical, or mental disorders and help them develop effective social and interpersonal skills.

more. (See the sidebar on page 3 for a comprehensive list of allied health occupations.) The fact is, employment in the vast majority of all allied health occupations is expected to increase at a much faster than average rate at least 27 to 40 percent through the year 2005.

A primary factor contributing to the rosy outlook for allied health professionals is the "managed care" system taking root in the healthcare industry today. Health maintenance organizations (HMOs) offer a perfect example of managed care. HMOs operate by setting fixed fees for healthcare services provided under their plans. If those needs are met for less, that extra money becomes profit for the HMO. In other words, the doctors don't decide what to charge for their services the HMOs do. And oftentimes it simply costs less, without sacrificing quality of care, to get somebody else (namely, an allied health professional) to do certain things the doctor used to do.

This doesn't mean doctors are going out of business. It means they're shifting their focus more toward the services only they are trained to do, and leaving a broad range of services to other capable hands. Under a managed care system, more and more emphasis is being placed on pre-care and post-care, which means placing more and more responsibility for healthcare delivery in the hands of allied health workers.

"The HMOs want to put the money on the front end and on the back end. They don't want to put much of their money in the middle of the basket, with the doctors," says Richard Thomas, vice president of the Medical Research Services Group in Memphis, Tennessee. "On the front end, they want to prevent illness. On the back end, they want to prevent relapses. It's cost effective."

Managed Care: A Case Study

The role of two high-growth occupations—physical therapists (PTs) and physical therapy assistants (PTAs)—show how allied health workers fit into the managed care scheme of things.

"It's pre-prevention medicine, meaning that if I came in with a strain from a workout, for example, they'd treat my knee plus put me on a program to prevent it from happening again," describes Jason Pan-Kita, marketing director for TheraSearch, an online employment recruiting firm in Fort Worth, Texas, that is geared toward placing physical therapists, occupational