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Physician assistants a lot like doctors

By **SCOTT ANDRONMcClatchy Newspapers**

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MIAMI --]

Charity Ramsey has the white lab coat, the stethoscope, and the prescription pad. She spends all day treating patients. But she's not a doctor.

Ramsey is a physician assistant, a fast-growing profession whose members say they can do most of what a doctor does, but without the seven-plus years of medical school and residency.

Instead, PAs, as they are called, typically take a 27-month graduate degree, after which they can take the licensing exam and jump right into practice.

After that, starting salaries in Florida average almost \$55,000, while experienced workers average almost \$100,000, according to the state labor department.

New patients are sometimes unfamiliar with PAs, but most warm up quickly, practitioners say.

"They say, 'Are you going to go on to be a doctor?' and I say, 'No, this is my chosen field,'" said Ramsey, who works at a small family medical practice in Boca Raton, Fla.

"We really see the same type of patients with the same problems."

PAs must work under the supervision of a doctor, but beyond that they have wide latitude. They can work in any specialty, and can change specialties if they can find a doctor willing to work with them.

Miguel Garcia, who just graduated from Barry University's PA program, has a job lined up with a cardiac surgery practice in the Tampa area. He will assist the doctors at the operating table.

"You're scrubbed in, you stand across the operating table from the surgeon and you're assisting throughout the course of the surgery," he said.

Admission to PA school can be competitive. Nova Southeastern University has received more than 1,000 applications for 85 seats in its master's program, said Bill Marquardt, NSU's associate dean for physician assistant education. As with other PA programs, NSU's requires students to have taken undergraduate science courses such as biochemistry, microbiology and anatomy.

The school strongly prefers students with some experience working in health care so they know what they are getting into.

For those admitted, the program is intense. While a master's in business administration might be 40 or 45 credits, and a law degree 90, NSU's PA program includes 140 credits. Study must be full-time. The first 15 months are spent mainly in the classroom, while the rest consists of a series of rotations working with doctors in a variety of specialties.

Barry's program is similar, but Miami Dade College has a slightly different arrangement. MDC offers a bachelor's degree program, with the PA classes and clinical training making up the second of two years of study.

After graduation and licensure, PAs can work in hospitals or doctors' offices, but not every institution uses them.

For example, some hospitals prefer to employ advanced registered nurse practitioners, who serve similar functions to PAs.

Nurse practitioners typically have undergraduate and master's degrees in nursing. Like PAs, they can prescribe drugs. Many work in primary care, while some specialize in fields like cardiology or pediatrics.

Pamela Miller, a PA who works with a dermatologist in North Miami Beach, said she was planning to become a doctor until she learned about the PA profession while working at a hospital in Colorado.

"Some of the physicians said they wish they had gone to PA school," Miller said. Now her work ranges from treating acne or rashes to performing out-patient surgery for skin cancer.

Ramsey said she thinks PAs also tend to have more flexible schedules than doctors.

"I felt becoming a PA offered the ability to practice medicine," she said, "but also the ability to enjoy life."

PHYSICIAN ASSISTANTS

Education: 27 months of training, typically in the form of a master's degree, available locally from Barry, Nova Southeastern and Keiser universities. Miami Dade College offers similar training in the form of a bachelor's degree. The University of Florida's medical school has a master's program in Gainesville.

License: Required, issued by the state after passage of an exam.

Salary: \$55,000 to start in Florida, about \$99,000 for experienced workers, according to the state labor department.

Employment growth: 29,000 new jobs expected in the United States by 2018, a 39 percent increase, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

For more information: American Academy of Physician Assistants, aapa.org.

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Phone: (209) 578-2000.