

## CAREERS

# A Wealth of Opportunities

by Janet Herring-Sherman

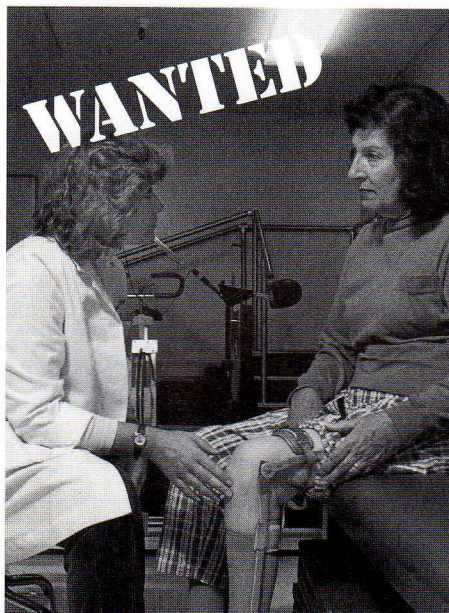
As members age, babies boom, schools struggle, and new technologies, drugs, and procedures become standard, the health care workforce has had to change. Opportunities abound for allied health professionals in radiology, pharmacy, physical and respiratory therapy, and medical/surgical technology. But finding qualified people to fill those jobs isn't easy.

A 1989 study conducted by Kaiser Permanente's Personnel Shortage Task Force projects that our Northern California Region will require at least 17% more health care professionals and nurses by 1995. By the year 2000, it's estimated that one out of every six jobs in the U.S. will be related to health care.

The need is so great that the California Legislature created an Allied Health Advisory Committee. The committee is holding a series of hearings for government, health care employers, and the public. At the first hearing, conducted in late spring, Kaiser Permanente prepared a detailed written response to the committee's questions about the non-physician career shortage. We're also working to increase our own number of qualified applicants for allied health careers.

### Supply and Demand

While the need for help in these allied health fields is increas-



### PHYSICAL THERAPISTS

*Physical therapist Kathe Hickey assists member Maria Neri.*

ing dramatically, the pool of skilled labor isn't — largely because few people know about these professions. "Ask children about people who work in hospitals, and they mention doctors and nurses but no one else," points out Pat Finnegan, professional/technical recruiter, Regional Office.

Nor has there been much awareness about allied health careers among students at the high school level. "Kaiser Permanente has begun networking with several high schools. We've developed a speakers' bureau with representatives from the different hard-to-fill specialties who speak in schools across the region," explains Pat.

To attract high school students to allied health care careers, Kaiser Permanente has developed several programs. The Community Classroom Program at our Santa Teresa Community Medical Center, and similar programs in South San Francisco and Oakland, enables high school students to receive on-the-job experience in health care while earning school credits. The region-wide Summer Youth Program introduces students to health care careers at Kaiser Permanente while showing them what kind of educational requirements are necessary and motivating them to stay in school. The physical therapy departments at our Santa Clara and Santa Teresa medical centers operate an eight-week volunteer program for college-age students each summer.

We need younger people to become interested in health care careers, Pat says, because "you can't run a hospital without these ancillary helpers." When these vital positions go unfilled, the work is referred outside of Kaiser Permanente, contributing to the rising cost of health care.

Then, too, professionals in some of these disciplines have more opportunities outside of hospitals than they did a decade ago. "Physical therapists, for instance, might opt to work in sports medicine now, instead of in a hospital," points out Bill Lindgren, vice president, Human Resources Planning and Development, Central Office.



# Opportunities

The lack of emphasis on health and science curricula in middle school and high school has a profound influence on the number of youth who pursue allied health careers. Students with inadequate training in these subjects are not likely to choose health care as a career. "We need to get into the schools and educate kids about how attractive these health careers are and encourage them to take math and science. And we need to develop better relationship with colleges to recruit more grads," says Bill.

## Innovative Responses

In the meantime, the Northern California Region has developed several solutions for lowering the high vacancy rate in the allied health careers. A Professional/Technical Student Loan Program has been established, training programs have been instituted, and the recruitment effort has been intensified and expanded.

Modeled after the nursing loan program, which was established in 1988, a pilot loan program for professional/technical students was begun this year. Students accepted into or enrolled in an accredited program at a California community college or university and who will graduate by the summer of 1993 were eligible. The program will be repeated next year.

Loan money has been earmarked for 50 students in diagnostic imaging, respiratory therapy, physical therapy, and pharmacy. Half of this loan money has been set aside for Kaiser Permanente employees pursuing careers in these areas.

The trial one-year Surgical Tech Program, coordinated by Regional Human Resource Development and conducted in collabora-



## ULTRASOUND TECHS

*Leslie Cornwall uses ultrasound on a pregnant Health Plan member.*

tion with Merritt Community College in Oakland, graduated a class of 18 in June. It's a prime example of a Kaiser Permanente program implemented to fill a specific need.

An estimated 20,000 additional surgical techs will be needed by the end of the 1990s because of the continuing shortage of nurses, the increased number of outpatient surgeries being performed, and advances in surgery. "We look more and more to para-medical staff to provide specialized care in different areas," points out Mary Hayward, assistant manager, Human Resource Development, Regional Office. Yet there are only three surgical tech training programs in the state.

Bob Gray, manager of respiratory care in our Hayward Medical Center, has been a respiratory therapist for 20 years. He doesn't recall any difficulty in filling respiratory care positions until about 10 years ago when Diagnostic Related Groups (DRGs) were instituted.

"When DRGs began, it was surmised that respiratory care was over-utilized. Word got out to high school counselors that respiratory care was on the decline and fewer employees would be needed.

"It's a geographic problem, too," continues Bob. "Most young people just starting out (as respiratory therapists) want to live where there's affordable housing. They don't want to commute long distances to city hospitals. In rural areas, it's especially hard to recruit students away from where they received their schooling."

Robert Brown, director of human resources in our Richmond Medical Center, helped establish a state- and nationally-accredited Radiology Training Program in Richmond three years ago. Funded by the Private Industry Council of Richmond, Contra Costa Community College in San Pablo, and Kaiser Permanente, the two-year program commenced when there was an average total of 30 radiology vacancies in the Northern California Region. "We focused on radiology, because we had serious concerns about the quality of training grads were receiving in other programs," explains Robert.

"It's a good profession. There aren't many jobs where you can start off earning \$18 to \$20 an hour. Some computer knowledge is needed. If you like video games, you might like to be a radiologic tech," he points out. "You have the opportunity to be involved with the actual care of the patient. It changes fast, and the long-term career opportunities are endless."

Kaiser's Radiology Training Program creates goodwill by taking at least 10 community individuals into the program each year who are at risk of being laid off from their jobs.



Other allied health professions also need new people. There is a 15% shortage of medical technologists nationwide. In response, a Medical Tech Training Program is planned by the end of the year, according to Verna Tate, laboratory manager, Walnut Creek Medical Center.

Recruiting pharmacists to Kaiser Permanente is a matter of marketing, says Don Kellenberger, pharmacy area manager and recruitment coordinator, Regional Office. "We travel to schools of pharmacy in California and out of state, because building bridges with colleges is absolutely critical. Twice a year we recruit at the California state board exam, and we attend state and national conventions," explains Don. "We found that we needed to raise the visibility of Kaiser Permanente and the professional opportunities here. The strategy has helped. Three years ago we had 100 positions open. In April of this year, there were 50. If we hadn't done all that we have, our vacancy rate would be significantly higher."

The scarcity of pharmacists became evident more than five years ago when enrollment in schools of pharmacy was down. Enrollment in pharmacy schools is back up now, but there are only three pharmacy schools in the state. Kaiser Permanente competes for those schools' graduates with hospitals, retail chains, pharmacies, and other employers. "There are too few graduates to fill all these needs so active recruitment for pharmacy professionals will continue indefinitely," says Don.

Physical therapy is one of the allied health careers most severely affected by the personnel shortage. The need for physical therapists is

expected to increase 87% by the year 2000 because, as the population ages, there are more illnesses and injuries that require physical therapy. It's considered the third-fastest growing profession by the U.S. Department of Labor.

The shortage of physical therapists is the result of a lack of affordable training programs and qualified faculty, says Kathe Hickey, director of physical and occupational therapy, Santa Clara Medical Center. "The University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), for instance, has one of two public physical therapy programs in northern California. From 800 to 1,200 applicants apply each year, and they can only take 40 into the program," she points out. To support the training programs that do exist, several physical therapists from Kaiser Permanente have begun teaching physical therapy courses at UCSF and at De Anza Community College in Cupertino.



**Anthony Hidalgo, CORT, (left) assists orthopedic surgeon Eric Schmidt, MD, in Santa Rosa.**

Kaiser Permanente's efforts to recruit and retain physical therapists began in earnest in 1988. Professional ads and promotional materials were created to enhance Kaiser Permanente's image. Clinical symposiums were sponsored. A stipend internship program was established. A relocation incentive to move to northern California was developed.

In addition, we expanded the two-year Orthopedic Physical Therapy Residency Program at Hayward and the Proprioceptive Neuromuscular Facilitation (PNF) Program at the Vallejo Rehabilitation Center.

### ***Professional Recruitment***

Getting the word out about opportunities at Kaiser Permanente to professionals already working in the allied health careers is critical, stresses Pat Finnegan. To help accomplish this, a National Coordinated Recruitment Program was initiated this year. In June, Kaiser Permanente had a booth at a national conference of nearly 5,000 physical therapists. There, recruiters and physical therapists from the Northern California Region, as well as representatives from other regions, talked with experienced physical therapists, as well as with instructors and recent graduates.

Kaiser Permanente also was represented at a pharmacy convention attended by 7,800 participants in March. "We had a hot-job sheet listing all Kaiser Permanente pharmacy vacancies at the time," recalls Bill Lindgren. "The recruiters feel they get bona fide leads and do some serious seed planting at these events."

Even during these economically lean times, allied health careers offer job and financial stability along with the challenge of learning treatments and technologies that will be key to the future of health care. ■