Health Care Thrives Despite Ill Effects of Recession

Healthcare hiring is picking up slightly this year, but a number of factors may continue to limit job growth, industry professionals say.

From the start of the recession in December 2007 through September 2010, healthcare employment increased nationally by 720,000 jobs, according to an analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data by the Altarum Institute’s Center for Studying Health Spending. Meanwhile, non-healthcare industries lost nearly 8.5 million jobs in the same time.

Although the growth rate in healthcare employment remains positive, it is still impacted by the lingering effects of the recession.

The economic downturn has not only shifted the demand and access to health care, but also health providers’ financial status. Healthcare organizations have seen declining revenues because of reduced demand for elective procedures, an increased number of patients unable to pay medical bills, and significant losses in investment income.

However, the recession has increased demand for community health services that provide subsidized and low-cost care. Also, procedures once performed only in hospitals are now being performed in outpatient care centers. Employment in these places is expected to grow as health care in general expands.

Care for aging baby boomers will also create demand in the healthcare industry. The increase in the number of older persons is driving demand for healthcare professionals in nursing and residential care facilities, as well as for those who can provide care for patients who want to be treated at home.

The recession hit some careers harder than others.

“There will always be a need for nurses because they take care of individuals long term,” says Jessica Renard, director of Career Services at South University — West Palm Beach. “And with medical changes and people living longer, there is a need for physical therapist assistants in nursing homes.”

Because of variation in demographics and geographic settings, it’s difficult to measure the overall effects of the economy on the healthcare sector.

“The job climate in one part of the country may be different than other parts,” Renard explains. “Also, the recession hit some careers harder than others.”

Allied health professions and nursing careers have shown the most promising job outlooks.

In December, the U.S. News & World Report listed what they expected to be the 50 best careers of 2011. The list is based on U.S. Department of Labor job-growth estimates for 2008 to 2018 and is narrowed down to occupations that are expected to add jobs at an above-average rate during this decade. The healthcare careers listed include lab technician and physician assistant.

“The physician assistant field is popular because being a physician assistant allows you to practice medicine, but doesn’t take as long of a training time as it does to become a doctor,” says Steve Martin, AGC, MPAS, PA-C, DFAAPA, associate professor in the Physician Assistant program at South University — Tampa. He adds that physician assistants work under the supervision of a physician and help carry out many of the tasks performed by doctors except those that are more complicated.

The healthcare industry has not been immune to the effects of the recent economic turmoil. But as the sector expands, employment opportunities within it have also.