

SHORTAGE OF PHARMACISTS

Pharmacy programs are much-needed Rx

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BY ENCARNACION PYLE *THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH*

Ohio State University received more than 900 applications for 125 spots in its pharmacy college in the fall -- despite the creation of two new pharmacy programs at other Ohio colleges in the past two years.

"We have tripled the number of students we accept since starting the doctor of pharmacy program in the 1990s, but we still can't meet the demand," said Robert Brueggemeier, dean of OSU's College of Pharmacy.

There are shortages of pharmacists both nationwide and in Ohio. By 2020, 157,000 positions will be unfilled nationwide, including nearly 20,000 in Ohio, according to projections.

The good news is that pharmacy graduates don't have to worry about finding a job. Bidding wars between pharmacies and hospitals have resulted in \$80,000- to \$110,000-a-year offers with perks, including signing bonuses and tuition reimbursements.

"I could place 200 to 300 new pharmacy graduates tomorrow if I had them," said Ernest Boyd, executive director of the Ohio Pharmacists Association.

Colleges have responded to meet the growing need.

Ohio State, Ohio Northern, the University of Cincinnati and the University of Toledo -- all of which have been graduating pharmacy students since the 1950s -- recently have expanded their programs.

The University of Findlay and Northeastern Ohio Universities College of Medicine opened new pharmacy schools in the past two years. And Cedarville University hopes to start offering classes in fall 2009.

The demand for pharmacists is expected to continue to outpace supply as baby boomers age and pharmacists demand more time to work with doctors and dieticians to make sure patients effectively manage their illnesses. Many pharmacists are nearing retirement, and more workers are choosing part-time work over a full-time week.

The number of prescriptions filled each year has increased from 2 billion to 3.2 billion in the past decade, fueled largely by the growing number of drugs being produced.

Like many other pharmacy schools, Ohio State moved from an undergraduate-focused program in the 1990s to a four-year graduate professional degree called a doctor of pharmacy.

Applicants must have an undergraduate degree and satisfy several other requirements before being accepted, especially if they don't have a strong science background.

In contrast, most other pharmacy schools offering the doctor of pharmacy degree accept students right out of high school for a six-year program -- two for prerequisite courses and four devoted solely to pharmacy-related classes and unpaid fieldwork.

OSU students spend their first three years focused on classwork, with short internships shadowing pharmacists. Their last year is devoted to three, three-month rotations in a community pharmacy, hospital and other settings.

Brueggemeier and the deans of the other three original pharmacy schools don't view the two new pharmacy programs in Ohio as competition but worry that there will be no one to teach if too many programs are added. Programs need both faculty members and community pharmacists willing to give students on-the-job training.

"We're either at or near capacity," he said. There are 450 faculty positions open nationwide.

Shannon Hendricks, 24, of Dayton, earned bachelor's degrees in chemistry and electrical engineering at Wright State University but found lab work isolating.

Now in her second year in Ohio State's pharmacy program, Hendricks is planning a career working in an ambulatory-care center and teaching at OSU, which will allow her to work with patients and students.

"We're not just drug dispensers anymore, we're medical professionals -- and the world is starting to finally appreciate us," she said.