

Shortage of pharmacists looms
Companies offering higher salaries, better hours
to attract employees

Thursday, Sept. 28, 2006
By Marcus Moore
Staff Writer

Baby boomers will soon have a major health care concern on their hands: a major shortage of pharmacists to issue prescription drugs.

Many pharmacists will either retire or opt for more part-time work in the next five to 10 years, according to a national workforce study. The problem is already taking its toll on county drugstores and other businesses.

"The shortage of pharmacists is an industry-wide problem that's affecting every pharmacy business," said Ashley Flower, a spokeswoman with Rite Aid Pharmacy of Harrisburg, Pa. The company "offers a competitive package" for its pharmacists, Flower said, without providing specifics. Giant Food LLC, with offices in Landover, offers a 34-hour work week with full benefits to attract pharmacists to its in-store pharmacies, said spokesman James W. Miller. The grocery chain offers "competitive wages" and has an "ongoing recruitment with pharmacy schools," he said.

Mike DeAngelis, a spokesman for CVS Pharmacy, which has 35 stores in Prince George's County, said the Woonsocket, R.I., chain has about 17,000 pharmacists working in its 6,200 stores nationwide.

"We're in relatively good shape as far as staffing," said DeAngelis, who declined to comment on the company's compensation package.

The shortage comes as the nation faces its highest demand ever for prescription drugs. Customers spent \$3.38 billion on prescription drugs last year, compared with \$3.27 billion in 2004, according to the National Association of Chain Drug Stores. Prince George's — including Bowie, with a relatively large senior citizen population — has been identified as an area hit by the shortage, according to the association. Montgomery and Southern Maryland have also been affected, the group says.

Officials with Dimensions Healthcare System, the nonprofit that runs five health care facilities in Prince George's, could not be reached for comment.

Maryland hospitals had a 10.5 percent vacancy rate for pharmacists last year, up from 8.5 percent in 2004, said Nancy Fiedler, a spokeswoman with the Maryland Hospital Association.

The shortage comes at a time when pharmacists are spending less time dispensing drugs and more time giving immunizations and counseling seniors on proper medication usage and the new Medicare prescription drug plan, according to the American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy.

The face of pharmacy will change soon, according to a study released in March by Pharmacy Manpower Project Inc., a nonprofit association that develops data on the size and demographics of the pharmacy workforce. Forty-two percent of male pharmacists are nearing retirement, compared with only about 10 percent of women.

David A. Mott, the study's project director and an associate professor at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, said drugstores and pharmacies are now feeling the pinch, but the problem will only get worse over time. "We're just trying to figure out how bad it is," Mott said.

To combat the trend, pharmacy schools will expand their class sizes and new schools will open, Mott said. Mott expects roughly 10,000 pharmacy school graduates nationally next year. Pharmacy schools usually graduate about 8,000 students per year, Mott said. Pharmacies and drugstores are offering higher salaries to attract pharmacists. "It's a pretty good time to be a pharmacist," Mott said.

Salaries have increased 38 percent since 1999, when the shortage first began, according to a survey in Drug Topics magazine, a trade publication. Pharmacists earned an average of \$64,980 per year in 1999; last year, they earned \$89,723, according to the survey. Pharmacists working in discount or mass merchandising stores earned \$93,442 last year, while health system pharmacists earned \$88,268. "Whenever you have a shortage, one way to get them to your pharmacy is to pay more," said Katherine Knapp, dean of Touro University's college of pharmacy in Vallejo, Calif.



Christopher Anderson/The Gazette
Joyce Yates (left), pharmacy manager at Giant Food in Largo, confers with Natasha Poteat, a pharmacy

Last year, Daniel P. Mosser, Prince George's Community College's vice president of workforce development, and Tamela D. Hawley, dean for institutional research, issued a report that detailed a national workforce shortage highlighting shortfalls in construction and health care. The health care industry accounts for 11 percent of Prince George's employment and is expected to add 7,764 jobs over the next five years, according to Mosser's report.

E-mail Marcus Moore at mmoore@gazette.net.