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Pharmacy School applications rising

The Pharmacy College Application Service (PharmCAS) is a centralized service used by colleges and schools of pharmacy to screen applicants.

Fifty-three schools nationwide currently use PharmCAS.

For the 2005-2006 cycle, there was a 1.5 percent increase in applicants but a 19.1 percent increase in number of applications submitted.

PharmCAS first was used for the 2003-04 application cycle.

Statistical information provided by The American Association of Colleges of Pharmacy.

Demand for pharmacists by state

Aggregate Demand Index tracks the need for pharmacists nationwide. The ratings are on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 for low demand and 5 for high demand.

Oregon: 4.29
California: 4.33
Washington: 3.88
Idaho: 3.5
National Average: 4.21

Demand Categories

5 = High demand: difficult to fill open positions
4 = Moderate demand: some difficulty filling open positions
3 = Demand in balance with supply
2 = Demand is less than the pharmacist supply available

Figures for March 2006

A sign on the front door of the newly constructed Walgreens on Lancaster Drive and State Street reads: "Sorry, store not open yet! Come back again soon! Thank You!"

The store's grand opening was slated for May, but the pharmacy chain is still trying to lure pharmacists to staff the store.

The delay of the opening of the Walgreens highlights a problem plaguing cities throughout Oregon and the nation: a growing shortage of pharmacists.

The demand for pharmaceutical products is soaring, and pharmacists are dedicating more time to patient services and less time to dispensing pills.

More women pharmacists are working part time for personal and family reasons, and more male pharmacists are creeping closer to retirement, a new study by the Pharmacy Manpower Project found. The combination could lead to a greater shortage of pharmacists in the next decade.

Walgreens hired pharmacists to work at the new store in Salem, said Carol Hively, a spokeswoman for Walgreens. But the company decided to place them in the other three Walgreens already open in Salem instead to alleviate the high demand for pharmacy services that those stores were facing.

"If you don't have a pharmacist in your pharmacy, you can't open your doors," said Wayne Kradjan, the dean of the College of Pharmacy at Oregon State University.

OSU has a joint pharmacy program with Oregon Health & Science University in Portland.

More pharmacies in Oregon might have to keep those doors closed or shorten their operating hours in the next five years, Kradjan said.

Kradjan recently contacted major hospitals, health care centers and pharmacy chains in Oregon inquiring about job openings for pharmacists. He found about 130 openings throughout the state.

In the next five years, those groups anticipate having 400 job openings as pharmacists retire, Kradjan said. Those numbers do not include the job openings at independent pharmacies throughout Oregon. Many of the job openings are in Oregon's rural areas along the Coast and in southern parts of the state.

Kradjan said 70 to 80 students per year graduate from Oregon State University's College of Pharmacy. The challenge will be getting graduates to work in rural areas where the number of pharmacists is most depleted, he said.

Demand escalates

Thanks to new technology and help from pharmaceutical technicians, pharmacies are more efficient than ever. If efficiency is up, what is driving the shortage? "Even with the new technology, the number of prescriptions that are being generated are rising astronomically," Kradjan said. Aging baby boomers and a variety of new medications are boosting the number of prescriptions, Kradjan said.

Along with booming demand, pharmacists also face new responsibilities. Now they are spending more time advising patients, giving vaccines and evaluating drug therapies.

And pharmacists plan to use more time to explain to patients the intricate prescription drug benefit plan, Medicare Part D.

"They are the last person in the health-care chain the patient talks to," said Jim Thompson, the director of the Oregon State Pharmacy Association, "Physicians don't have the time to do it anymore."

Rural areas hit hard by the shortage also are the most dependent on pharmacists, Thompson said.

"The pharmacy is the center for medical information in the rural area," Thompson said. "When they lose a pharmacist, they lose their only pharmacist." As demand surges, a large part of the pharmacy work force is making plans to retire. About 41 percent of all male pharmacists are 55 or older, according to a new study tracking pharmacist employment by Pharmacy Manpower Project. Only 10 percent of women pharmacists are 55 or older.

Working part time also is increasing in the pharmacy industry, especially among women. In 2004, 27 percent of women and 15.5 percent of men were working part time, according to Pharmacy Manpower Project's study.

Seeking solutions
The pharmacy industry is using a number of strategies to address the shortage. None of them is a quick fix.

One strategy is to graduate more pharmacy students and another is to start more pharmacy schools. This fall, Pacific University in Forest Grove will be adding a pharmacy program.

Robert Rosenow, the dean of the School of Pharmacy at Pacific University, said there are positive and negative aspects to increasing class sizes at pharmacy schools.

"You have more students, but more crowded classrooms," Rosenow said. The more crowded a class, the less time students will have to interact with their professors, Rosenow said.

There will be 66 students in the first pharmacy class at Pacific University. It will be three years before those students graduate and move into the work force, Rosenow said.

Recruiting students to attend pharmacy schools in the past few years has not been a problem, said Katherine K. Knapp, the dean of the College of Pharmacy at Touro University in California.

"The application rates have soared," Knapp said.

Knapp runs the Aggregate Demand Index, a Web site that tracks the need for pharmacists throughout the nation.

Knapp said that application rates for pharmacy schools dropped off during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

