

Demand, Salaries Up for Primary Care Physicians

BY JANE ANDERSON

Although demand for many medical specialists remains strong, group practices and hospitals are focused on recruiting general internists, hospitalists, family physicians, pediatricians, and psychiatrists, according to a review of physician recruitment.

In "2009 Review of Physician Recruiting Incentives," the physician-search firm Merritt Hawkins & Associates notes that in the past year it handled more requests for family physicians than for any other specialty type. Requests for primary care physicians between April 2008 and March 2009 increased 23% over the previous year, the company said. It added that although insurers and government programs are increasing their focus on primary care, fewer physicians in training are choosing to be generalists.

A spokeswoman for the Medical Group Management Association agreed that primary care physicians are in higher demand than other specialties. She added, however, that MGMA's own surveys show that increases in primary care physicians' incomes overall haven't been beating inflation.

On the other hand, the review by Merritt Hawkins, which tracks over 3,200 physician recruiting assignments, found that salaries offered to newly recruited physicians reflect the increased demand. According to the company, the average salary or income guarantee offered to family physicians jumped 19% in the past 3 years, to \$173,000; the average offered to general internists rose 15%, to \$186,000; and the average for pediatricians increased 13%, to \$171,000.

David Nyman, manager of physician recruitment at the Marshfield Clinic in Wisconsin, said in an interview that the disparities between salary figures in the MGMA and Merritt Hawkins reports can be explained by the different groups of physicians involved. Merritt Hawkins tends to take on the "harder" recruitment assignments and therefore can wind up paying physicians more than the average, he said.

Mr. Nyman added that he's seen an increase in the number of groups willing to help new physicians with their student loans as an incentive to sign on. Groups are well aware that few physicians are going into primary care these days, which is driving increased recruitment of generalists, he said. "People are adding primary care physicians now, anticipating that it's going to be more difficult to find them down the road," he said.

"Virtually every hospital or large medical group in the United States would be happy to add a family physician or general internist," said Merritt Hawkins' president, Mark Smith, in a statement. "There simply are not enough primary care doctors to go around."

Demand is also robust for hospitalists, the report said, and that may be hurting primary care. Because many internists are choosing to practice as hospitalists, the supply of physicians for general in-

ternal medicine has been constrained, the report concluded.

Meanwhile, demand is strong for various specialists, particularly general surgeons, the Merritt Hawkins report found. More than 40% of general surgeons are 55 or older and many are retiring, the report said. Merritt Hawkins said it conducted nearly twice as many general surgery searches for clients in 2008-2009 as it did the previous year.

Psychiatry faces a similar situation, the report said, with demand for psychiatrists strong and many practicing psychiatrists near retirement. Other specialty areas experiencing robust demand include orthopedic surgery, obstetrics/gynecology, cardiology, urology, pulmonology, gastroenterology, otolaryngology, hematology/oncology, dermatology, neurology, and emergency medicine.

The search firm reported that 85% of

all physicians were offered signing bonuses in 2008-2009, compared with just 58% 3 years ago. The average signing bonus last year was \$24,850.

The report also suggested that more hospitals are hiring physicians as employees and paying them salaries. In 2005-2006, 23% of the physician-search assignments Merritt Hawkins handled involved physician employment by a hospital. In 2008-2009, that rate increased to 45%. ■

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