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## Prospects still bright for nurses

*Dip in job openings temporary, hospital and WSU officials say*

Time is on your side. Registered nurses can take those words to the bank, say regional health care employers. Although jobs are fewer this year and some registered nurses in Spokane are being laid off as part of broad hospital reorganizations, the stubborn recession won't be able to slow health care spending much longer.

Job-seeking nurses face far fewer openings this year in the region than they did last year. But this year may be a blip. Inland Northwest Health Services, the operator of St. Luke's Rehabilitation Hospital and Northwest MedStar, anticipates new nurses will be needed next year for jobs ranging from patient care to electronic medical records, said Phyllis Gabel, chief human resources officer.

Nursing employment trends have been shooting skyward for many years as the nation ages and health care spending rises. Those underlying needs haven't changed. "We see a bright future for future nurses," said Patricia Butterfield, dean of the Washington State University College of Nursing.

Students may have to adjust their expectations and realize that the nation is in an economic downturn, Butterfield said. "We tell them to be patient."

Despite the choppy job market, nurses have ample opportunities. Butterfield said any nurse in good standing can find a job if they are willing to temper soaring aspirations to take jobs in less acute services in long-term care facilities or home health care settings.

Butterfield's sobering advice, however, comes with an upside: Nursing is a career path that can land a student a steady job at a local hospital or launch him or her toward a job with global reach. "Ultimately, they'll be able to do whatever they want," she said. "There's still going to be great jobs out there."

The Washington State Employment Security Department forecasts that the number of registered nurses in Spokane County will have risen from 5,113 in 2007, to about 5,705 by 2017. Hourly wages are about \$26.

Dan Klocko, vice president of human resources at Kootenai Medical Center, said the Coeur d'Alene hospital has entered a lull in bringing in new nurses. "We've hired the fewest nurses in five years," Klocko said.

Part of that trend is that some KMC nurses have suspended retirement plans, in part to shore up lost retirement savings. The hospital, he said, has never laid off employees and doesn't plan to this year. KMC foresees a hiring rebound as the recession eases.

The slowdown affecting KMC is indicative of the problems at hospitals everywhere. Patient numbers are down, partly because people are saving money and postponing elective surgeries, partly because it's been a mild flu season. Also, more patients seeking hospital care are uninsured because of job losses and the rising cost of

insurance. Some simply can't afford to pay deductibles. "We're feeling it here just like everyone else," Klocko said.

While registered nurses collect plenty of attention as a promising job field, there are numerous of other medical employment opportunities now and in the next 12 to 18 months. Hospitals and clinics can't seem to hire laboratory technicians fast enough.

At INHS there's always a need for physical therapists and assistants. Another job shoo-in is occupational therapists. "We're always looking for these people," said INHS' Gabel. She sees job growth in medical informatics as federal stimulus dollars drive innovation and implementation in electronic medical records sharing and security.

Washington's 10-year job forecast anticipates that the number of people employed by health care providers in Spokane County will grow from 15,256 in 2007 to 17,336 by the year 2017.

Butterfield said the numbers bode well for registered nurses. "We're talking about high-quality employment opportunities, and meaningful and important work," she said.