

# VA offers advanced practice opportunities

By Gretel H. Schueller

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is one of the country's largest health care providers. The agency employs more than 225,000 personnel to provide medical care and support for the nation's veterans and their families. Those health care workers treat nearly 750,000 patients on an inpatient basis and conduct more than 40 million outpatient visits. About 5,200 of those working for the VA are employed as pharmacists. They work at the VA's 163 hospitals, 850 ambulatory care and community-based outpatient clinics, 137 nursing homes, and 73 home-care programs nationwide.

As a result, VA pharmacy jobs vary greatly, said Jeff Ramirez, PharmD, chief of management/clinical information systems at the Veteran's Health Administration. "Kaiser Permanente is probably the closest to what the VA is like," he said. VA pharmacists work closely with physicians and nurses, and they routinely interact one-on-one with patients. At the agency, pharmacists provide patient education, conduct therapeutic and pharmacokinetic consulting services, attend conferences, interpret pharmacy benefits, develop research projects, work in pharmacy managed ambulatory care clinics, and conduct pharmaco-economic analyses.

"The opportunities are really quite across the board," noted Ramirez. And, he said, from a technology standpoint, "the VA is very much ahead of what you're going to find in Walgreen's or even at many teaching hospitals. It's cutting edge. Our computer system has a lot of features that you're not going to find anywhere else. For example, some 30,000-plus vets daily have their medication administration documented at the bedside using bar codes. We've shown a reduction in medication errors by 50% to 85%. At our automated mail pharmacies, we have some of the most sophisticated automated dispensing equipment that you are going to find in the United States."

Student pharmacists can take time to become acquainted with VA jobs through externships and residencies. "We have extensive externship programs with most schools of pharmacy," said Louis Cobuzzi, chief of pharmacy services at the Baltimore VA medical center. "The Department of Veteran's Affairs is a major health care organization in the United States and offers opportunity for advanced pharmacy practice." The VA also offers 262 pharmacy residencies.

Under a unique federal personnel system, VA facilities may directly appoint pharmacists to positions for which no civil service exam is required. To be eligible for employment, a pharmacist must be a U.S. citizen, hold a bachelor's degree or other first professional degree from an Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education-accredited school, a satisfactory physical exam, and English language proficiency.



Educational opportunities are available for qualified staff, and VA offers tuition support for job-related and continuing education courses as well as paid time off for approved continuing education programs. The Employee Incentive Scholarship Program awards scholarships up to a maximum of \$31,080, for training or advanced degrees deemed necessary by the VA; and the Education Debt Reduction Program provides up to \$44,000 over a 5-year period in student loan repayments for newly appointed pharmacists. The loan(s) must be for courses that led directly to qualifying for the appointed position, and the funds must be applied for within the first year of employment. Both the programs are competitive. Starting salaries are based on education and experience and vary by location.

For more information and to see what positions are currently open, visit the VA's health care recruitment and retention Web site ([www.vacareers.com](http://www.vacareers.com)), or apply directly to the human resources office at the VA health care facility where you desire employment.

*Gretel H. Schueller is a freelance science writer in Burlington, Vt.*

## Evenings, 7 on, 7 off Staff Pharmacist

**Benefis Healthcare**, Montana's largest healthcare system, is accepting applications for a full-time staff pharmacist to work evening shift (begins 12 Noon), 7 days on and 7 days off. Responsible for providing acute, patient-focused, clinical and dispensing functions. Required qualifications are: graduate of an ACPE-accredited school of pharmacy; current license to practice pharmacy in Montana (or eligible for licensure); computer skills; excellent oral skills and written communications skills; ability to adapt to a rapidly changing environment. Previous experience in healthsystem pharmacy preferred.

Benefis Healthcare, located in Great Falls, Montana, offers a quality work environment and excellent salary/benefits package. \$5,000 sign-on bonus and up to \$3,500 relocation assistance available. A career advancement program for pharmacists has been implemented.



Contact: **Shonté S. Gonzalez, Human Resources**  
**800-648-6620 or 406-455-5174**  
**Apply online! [www.benefis.org](http://www.benefis.org)**

eoe