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A Healthy Outlook for Mobile Healthcare Careers

by Kathie Hightower and Holly Scherer

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Nursing and healthcare in general always top the list of career fields mentioned in any discussion of mobile careers for military spouses. It makes sense. There are hospitals and medical offices everywhere, even in rural areas. Plus the job growth outlook is good.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, healthcare services account for almost 20% of all job growth from 1994 to 2005. Employment opportunities in the health services industry are projected to increase 28 percent through 2012, compared with 16 percent for all industries combined.

Many military spouses can attest to the availability of healthcare jobs from personal experience. Coast Guard spouse Elaine Wilhelm-Hass is in nursing and nursing administration. During her 25 years of being married to the military, she has moved over 15 times and has been able to find a job with each move, each one generally paying better than the one before.

Army spouse Jennifer Apke says, "I've found it somewhat easy to find Labor and Delivery nursing jobs wherever I go because of the on-going nursing shortage across the country."

What applies to nursing applies in many aspects to other healthcare positions — from dietitians to dental hygienists to laboratory technicians. As always, military spouses who succeed in transferring their healthcare career do so by being flexible, creative, and proactively open to possibilities.

Of course, as with most career fields, there are challenges as well. You might easily find work with each move, but you might not always find the exact position or shift that you want. Certification and continuing education requirements vary by state. The good news is that some states are trying to make things easier for military spouses. Virginia has proposed legislation that would expedite licensure for military spouses who are nurses/nurses aides, for example. Another challenge, of course, is that you always learning the ropes in each new work environment. But there are benefits to mobility as well.

Take advantage of the Wide Experience Your Military Moves Provide

"At first, I lamented that I'd always be the 'new RN,'" admits Wilhelm-Hass, "working all the weekends and holidays — but here's a secret! The NEW kid from out of state is often perceived as more clever or desirable than existing employees. I capitalized on that often."

“Knowing what I know now,” she continues, “I’d have skipped my early pattern of lamenting/fearing the moving phase. Moving is a GREAT opportunity for nurses!” Like many of the other spouses we interviewed, she took advantage of the moves to access a wider range of experience, adding to her resume and marketability. She has worked in many different aspects of nursing, from staff RN to Operating Room manager to director of surgical and parent/child services at a hospital to Quality Improvement Director for a Tricare region to healthcare consulting work.

As you interview, position your constant mobility as a benefit to your new employer. Point out how you bring experience from a wide variety of hospitals and offices, bringing in new ideas and innovations that have already been tested elsewhere. You bring with you a wide network of healthcare professionals from your previous experiences, professionals you can call on for resources, contacts and information. You bring the valuable skills of flexibility and quickly adapting to change, important but not always common attributes in all employees.

If you’ve worked in military hospitals you may have more to add to those benefits you bring to a new employer. Jennifer Apke is currently a midwife at the military hospital in Ft. Drum, NY. She’s worked in Obstetrics (OB) at the very busy clinic at Ft. Campbell, Kentucky. “I have learned first-hand that military OB care is on the cutting edge of research findings and national standards – not so in many civilian OB practices.”

The key is to turn what we often first think of as a liability – our constant moves – into a benefit, both to your new employer and to yourself.

As Anne Melia, an Army spouse says, “Our moves opened up opportunities that I may not have investigated had I remained a staff nurse in Pawtucket, Rhode Island.”

Proactively Expand Your Expertise

Your moves give you the perfect opportunity to keep expanding your expertise, by proactively taking on new challenges.

Apke chose to get specialized training as a midwife. Wilhelm-Hass chose to add first a Masters in Nursing and then a Masters in Business Administration and certification in Healthcare Quality to expand her opportunities.

“Take a long term strategy,” says Wilhelm-Hass. “If you want to work in a different arena, i.e. one with fewer weekend/holiday hours, seek the appropriate training opportunities. Check with the relevant professional association to find out what is needed in any given specialty.”

“One aspect that many healthcare professionals often overlook is the imperative to have computer skills,” adds Wilhelm-Hass. “It is no longer sufficient to rely on

your clinical skills, since medical records, specimen order entry and a host of other tasks are now computerized.”

Adopt a Mindset that Opens You Up to Possibilities Outside the Traditional

Traditional hospital work is certainly one way to go and probably the easiest to find. The spouses interviewed all found new positions easy to identify through newspaper want ads, from hospital websites and/or through networking with other healthcare professionals. You don't have to limit yourself to hospitals, however. Healthcare training and experience can open up other options as well.

Melia chose to make a change from ER nursing to allow more schedule flexibility. She worked first as a medical cost controller for an insurance company that handled workers compensation claims. Five years later her spouse was transferred to a state without that kind of work available. She took on a job as a Research RN for one company for two years, and has since worked on her own as an independent contractor monitoring research being performed at hospitals, clinics and medical offices.

Similarly, Marine spouse Ginny Sattler has used her nursing degree and a Master of Science in Business in a wide variety of positions from ICU staff nurse to Office Manager for Pediatric Ambulatory Care to School Health Nurse. Since 1990 she has worked for a risk management company associated with an insurance company, working on defense of medical malpractice claims as well as providing risk management services to a variety of clients.

“Because the clients are all over the United States and much of the work is on the telephone, the job moves with me,” she says. She also stresses the value of good computer skills, key to the virtual aspect of her current position.

Apke knows that midwifery positions might not be available in every community she moves to.

“I could potentially still find something in the field as a women's health nurse practitioner, a hospital maternity educator, a college nursing educator, or a labor and delivery nurse,” she says.

Army spouse Kittie Elrod has worked mainly as a labor and delivery nurse. At one assignment, she was a clinical instructor for the Maternal Child nursing class at a university. Other opportunities possible in her field include work as a pharmaceutical sales representative for companies who market to OB/GYN offices, or as a community health nurse educator.

Dawn Berry is an Army spouse and Registered Dietician. She currently works as a Renal Dietitian, but knows she can always pursue other possibilities with her degree, from long-term care dietary work in nursing homes or assisted living facilities to work in a hospital, in a fitness center, or in a weight loss clinic.

Another possibility is temporary or project work, either locally or on the road. According to the Department of Labor, the field of travel healthcare is growing faster than any other medical. Medical recruiting firms place trained personnel anywhere in the nation on short notice for temporary and contract jobs, especially specialized nurses and technicians.

Temporary travel positions probably aren't an option for a spouse with children at home, especially at times of military deployments, but they might very well be an attractive – and lucrative – option for military spouses with no children or whose children have left the nest. (Check out www.healthcaretraveler.com, www.travelnursing.com, www.HealthJobsUSA.com, and others.) And remember, just the fact that there is a need for companies like these means that the outlook for the healthcare profession continues to be rosy.

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(Note to readers: Future careers we plan to explore are: financial services, legal services, federal government, DoD and other types of contractors, network marketing companies, speakers/trainers, physicians & dentists, and virtual positions and businesses. If you have stories to share or questions to ask about any of those or other mobile careers, contact us at kathie@jumpintolife.net.)

Kathie Hightower and Holly Scherer lead workshops and are the authors of *Help! I'm a Military Spouse – I Want a Life Too!*

For more information, go to: militaryspousehelp.com