

## Hot job: Medical assistants vital in doctor visits

BY SCOTT ANDRON

When Nina Rodriguez got divorced and went looking for a career, she wanted to break into the medical field, and she wanted something she could learn quickly.

She signed up for training at a local technical school, and nine months later, she was a trained medical assistant with several job offers.

Now she assists a cardiologist in a large Fort Lauderdale medical practice owned by Holy Cross Hospital. She leads patients to the examination room, takes their blood pressure, weight and other vital signs, asks about their medical history, and enters the information into a portable computer so that everything is ready when the doctor arrives.

You can tell from her smile that she enjoys her work.

"If you really care about people and their welfare, then this is the job [for you] because you really feel like you're making people feel special," said Rodriguez, 52, of Oakland Park.

Rodriguez is in one of the fastest-growing careers in Florida. According to the state Agency for Workforce Innovation, more than 1,500 new medical assistants will be needed each year through 2015.

Other healthcare technicians, such as pharmacy techs, dental hygienists, physical therapy assistants, and the people who operate X-ray and other diagnostic machines also are in demand.

Medical practice managers interviewed said that despite the economic slowdown, it's still not easy to find good people.

"It's absolutely very difficult," said Joni Brown, chief operating officer of Digestive Care, a practice with 50 doctors and 200 support workers in Broward and Palm Beach counties. "We are having a very hard time recruiting."

Brown says her company looks for medical assistants with at least two years of experience. Applicants must have completed a trade-school program like the one Rodriguez went through. And they must pass a practical skills test by, for example, demonstrating their ability to draw blood correctly.

Digestive Care doesn't hire medical assistants right out of school, but such newcomers earn around \$10 an hour, according to state statistics. Average pay is closer to \$13.50, while more experienced workers can make \$17 or more, according to the state numbers and interviews with medical practice managers.

Actual wages vary depending on the employer, the size of the medical practice, and the assistant's skills and duties, among other factors.

Training typically takes between nine months and a year at a technical school or community college such as **Broward College**, Miami Dade College, or the adult education programs run by the county school systems. Private technical schools also are available.

At Sheridan Technical Center, a Hollywood trade school owned by the Broward school system, the program takes about a year and costs under \$4,000.

Students typically learn a mix of clinical skills, like how to take vital signs or draw blood, and administrative skills such as medical billing.

Credits from the program may transfer if the student goes on to more advanced training, like an associate degree in nursing. Registered nurses can start at upwards of \$25 an hour.

Training aside, medical assistants interviewed said there's another qualification essential to the job: You have to be good with people.

People are often unhappy, nervous and worried when visiting doctors' offices. They may have had a long wait before finally reaching the examining room.

"Patients walk into your office angry," said Lesa Lowe, another Holy Cross medical assistant.

"Being understanding, being patient -- just seeing that smile on your face -- sometimes it calms them down."

And in the end, Lowe said, she feels like she is really making a difference.

"You feel like you're a part of helping a person be cured," she said. "It makes you feel good."