

A Career in Correctional Health Care Services

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The quality of health care in the prisons of United States has improved profoundly in the last 30 years predominantly due to efforts by the medical community to improve opportunities for careers within the correctional health systems. Physicians and allied health care providers have utilized their skills, commitment, and ethics to positively impact the challenges associated with medical care in these settings. This has resulted in an increase in the number of physicians opting for careers in correctional health in the last few decades. Several medical schools have developed formal teaching programs in prison medicine. We interviewed several physicians currently working in correctional health settings and asked them why they would recommend this career track to other physicians. The top five reasons are described below.

Broad Scope of Practice

Correctional healthcare physicians say they enjoy a broader scope of practice than typically is found in community practices. This includes work in urgent care settings, HCV and HIV medicine, hospitalist medicine, and outpatient clinical care. The challenges associated with caring for vulnerable populations in jails and prisons provides the opportunity to make a measurable difference in the lives of prisoners. A variety of exciting medical cases stimulates physicians to stay current and to consider unusual diagnoses.

Opportunities to Lead Change

Physicians are often in leadership roles in administrative and management positions in correctional institutions. They can positively influence the development of reforms on conditions of confinement that can have widespread impact on the health of prisoners in a humane and compassionate manner. They often collaborate with community partners (such as public health authorities, medical societies, academic centers and advocates of social justice) as well as community based physicians to coordinate the rehabilitation of released inmates in a supportive manner. This is especially important for those who are afflicted with mental illness or addiction disorders.

Collegial and Supportive Environment

The advantages of working together in a team approach with colleagues who are skilled in prison

medicine has been cited as a critical component of a career in correctional healthcare. The camaraderie and support from other physicians creates a positive and refreshing environment in a relatively difficult setting and allows sharing of knowledge and productive discussions. Positive experiences related to a unique managed care model and continuity of care create a constructive setting for most physicians.

Personal Health and Well-Being

Most correctional facilities have a predictable work-week with flexibility to choose a schedule best suited to the individual physicians. Some correctional physicians cited the importance of work-life balance to them and value having time to pursue personal interests. Correctional healthcare physicians generally have smaller patient panels (approximately 600-700) than private practitioners. They also appreciate the lack of burdensome paperwork related to insurance and reimbursement issues. Manageable on-call responsibilities and extra credits for taking calls are attractive features that may suit mid-career physicians looking for a lifestyle change.

Outstanding Benefits

Pension and benefits programs for correctional healthcare physicians have been highly regarded and may compare favorably to those offered by non-correctional practices. These include a defined retirement plan, state-paid malpractice coverage, paid time off for CME, health insurance and competitive salaries. Lawsuits are defended by the Attorney General's office and considered civil suits rather than malpractice. Opportunities for career growth within the system allow physicians to pursue their goals and ambitions.

Challenges

Challenges associated with working in prisons include the challenging interpersonal dynamics of working with this population and extensive documentation requirements for encounters and events. Because most prisons are located outside of cities, commuting to work may be longer than in other settings. Regardless of these, the rewarding nature of the job outweighs the challenges for those physicians who have chosen this career track. To explore opportunities in California prisons, contact Erika Patton at erika.patton@cdcr.ca.gov or 916-691-6058.