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Registered nurse anesthetists help care for patients who have surgery

By Cindy Hodnett
SPECIAL SECTIONS WRITER

Open-heart surgery patients ... women with difficult labor and deliveries ... an anxious child with a broken arm — all of these people are likely to meet a CRNA, or certified registered nurse anesthetist, during their visit to the local hospital.

In the most basic terms, a CRNA is a health professional who provides anesthesia care to patients undergoing a surgical or medical procedure. But in day-to-day operations, Baptist Hospital CRNA James Thomas explains that a nurse anesthetist's role is actually much more.

"We're the patient's eyes and ears; we're awake for them because they can't be awake at that time," says Thomas. "We are the patients' advocates when they can't speak for themselves."

Thomas began his health-care career as a respiratory therapist. After nine years in an RT role, he returned to nursing school to become a nurse anesthetist. Today, Thomas enjoys an often intense four-day work week and a profession he feels is second to none.

"If someone is interested in health care, I can't think of a better job," he says. "And most nurse anesthetists I know would give the same answer. It is a very rewarding profession in so many ways."

Barry Amerson is the assistant director and chief CRNA for inpatient anesthesia at Baptist Hospital. He agrees

CERTIFIED REGISTERED NURSE ANESTHETIST



CRNA James Thomas (left) and Barry Amerson, the assistant director and chief CRNA for inpatient anesthesia, check on a patient in the recovery room at Baptist Hospital.

with Thomas' assessment and adds that there are many options for individuals considering a career in anesthesia.

"A CRNA is a registered nurse with a four-year degree who has completed at least one year of critical-care experience and a two-year master's program," says Amerson. "At North Carolina Baptist Hospital, we offer classes through the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The master's degree is awarded through UNC-G, but the majority of the classes are held here on-site at the hospital.

"CRNAs provide three types

of anesthesia care to patients," Amerson says. "One is monitored anesthesia, which is used for minor procedures or when the patient is experiencing anxiety about the procedure. Another type of care is general anesthesia, which is when the patient is completely 'out' and unaware of their surroundings. And the third is regional care — for example, an epidural or spinal — where the anesthesia blocks the sensation of pain to the part of the body undergoing surgery."

CRNAs work under the direction of a physician. Depending on the size of the hospital, the physician might be an anesthesiologist or a surgeon. In either situation, the CRNA collaborates with the physician on the care of the patient and is responsible for implementing the anesthesia plan.

Although all CRNAs are supervised by a physician, some work on a free-lance, contract basis while others work in hospitals or for a group of anesthesiologists. According to Amerson, every CRNA enjoys a favorable, long-term career outlook.

"There are a lot of different

opportunities in terms of practice settings and career paths when you become a CRNA," says Amerson. "The job outlook is great because a large number of CRNAs were educated in the '60s and '70s and now are preparing to retire. So there is a big deficit in how many we can educate and the number that will retire."

For Thomas, the positive career outlook is just one benefit of an extremely gratifying profession.

"As a CRNA, you have to be very vigilant. You have to watch every heartbeat, every breath and be ready to respond," says Thomas. "You also have to be very empathetic because your patients are often suffering and it is the CRNA's job to relieve their fears and pain. Often, the most critical time we spend with a patient is before they go to sleep because during that time, we have to gain their trust. It makes you feel great when you can make the patient more comfortable — both physically and emotionally — and that is why I became a CRNA. It's just a great career."

Need for health-care jobs growing in 2005, pros say

By M.B. Owens
SCHUPPS HOWARD NEWS SERVICE

During the past two years, the United States experienced some of the strongest economic growth in its history. Unfortunately, the increase in employment was not as robust as many economists predicted.

In what sectors can new jobs be expected during the next year? They should be found in many industries. And some should experience significant additions.

The sectors of health care, biotechnology, nanotechnology, computer technology, retail, banking and security should all experience employment increases throughout the year.

Health-care employment has remained relatively stable for most of the past two decades. In fact, in some fields, such as nursing, there were shortages. Demand for health-care positions should increase in almost every occupation this year.

Registered nurses and nursing assistants should see more demand for their expertise, resulting in even more shortages. Schools' and training programs cannot produce them fast enough. In the case of RNs, recruiters are looking overseas to help fill the shortage.

Other health-care occupations that should experience increased demand include physical therapists, respiratory therapists, occupational therapists, cardiovascular therapists, surgical technologists, medical assistants and physician assistants.

The addition of clinical personnel should mean an increasing need for support staff. More administrators, recruiters, accountants and data entry clerks should also be required.

Biotechnology is expected to become a boom industry over the next 10 years. Jobs should become abundant in every field. Because it is such a new industry, occupations that have not existed previously should be created.

M.B. Owens is the president of a career consulting company. E-mail him at usajoblacator1@yahoo.com.

More information

Salary range: \$100,000-\$150,000

Education: bachelor's degree in nursing; one year of critical-care experience; CRNA master's program at accredited facility

Career Opportunities: hospitals, anesthesiology groups, free-lance CRNA

Duties: collaborate with physician on anesthesia care plan; administer anesthesia; monitor patient during surgery; discuss care plan with patient; and review patient's history