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Psychiatrists in hot demand

Sept. 11, even 'The Sopranos' contributing to growth, recruiting firms say

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GREATER METROPLEX — When Dr. Somsri Griffin closed her thriving Arlington psychiatry practice a year ago, she planned initially on leaving full-time work. But then she decided to take on temporary assignments whenever the whim hit.

Griffin spent a month in El Paso and had several short-term assignments throughout the Metroplex. Then, Temple's Central Mental Health and Mental Retardation facility offered her a short-term assignment as a child and adolescent psychiatrist.

"Two months extended to four months, and four months extended to six months," Griffin said. "By then, I was hooked."

Starting this month, the Thailand native becomes a full-time psychiatrist at Central MHMR.

While the demand for psychiatrists doesn't rival the more common current shortages for family practitioners, radiologists and orthopedists, area physician recruiters are seeing more and more call for specialists like Griffin from hospitals and agencies nationwide.

"When the economy is bad, the demand for psychiatrists typically goes up. But we actually started to see an increase as early as 2000," said Kurt Mosley, vice president of business development for Irving-based Merritt, Hawkins & Associates, a national physician-recruiting firm. "We have 40 positions open now nationwide."

MHA's psychiatric searches rose from 23 in 2000 to 48 last year. As of last month, the company had performed 41 searches nationwide and is expected to surpass the 2001 figure this year.

"Dallas-Fort Worth is in better shape than most areas," Mosley said. "Buffalo, N.Y.; Oakland, Calif.; Houston and Des Moines, Iowa, are all areas where we've done

searches. Other areas are Green Bay, Wis.; and Pensacola, Fla. Rural areas continue to be our greatest challenge, but the demand is happening all over the U.S."

The demand is greatest for psychiatrists specializing in helping children, positions which can take six months or more to fill. Geriatric psychiatrists, which often treat patients with Alzheimer's, also are difficult positions to fill.

The "Sept. 11 aftermath" may have put patients' focus back on psychiatry. But most health care professionals and recruiters agree that improved treatments and destigmatization of those seeking care also have made an impact.

American Medical Association statistics show there are 38,900 psychiatrists in the United States, but only 29,570 are actively working in a practice setting.

U.S. businesses, government and families lose \$113 billion a year from the cost of untreated and mistreated mental illnesses because of discriminatory business practices, uncoordinated spending programs, fear and misunderstandings, according to a 2001 survey by the National Mental Health Association. More than 54 million people in the United States have a mental disorder in any given year.

"Depression and anxiety disorders alone affect millions in corporate America," Mosley said. "More people are willing to admit to seeking help for their problems. Even a TV show like "The Sopranos," where Tony Soprano sees a psychiatrist, has made it more acceptable for even a tough guy to ask for help."

More interest by students

Griffin, who commutes back to the Metroplex on the weekends, said she declined several offers to work in Denver and other cities before taking the Central Texas position. Central MHMR also is looking for a psychiatrist to serve as medical director. Dallas' Green Oaks Hospital has between 10 and 14 psychiatrists on staff, and another 25 who have medical privileges. But Tom Collins, Green Oaks' CEO, is searching for two psychiatrists for its sister-facility, North Central Medical Center in McKinney.

"We have a couple of doctors out there that are handling things fine right now, but the population growth in that area would accommodate more," said Green, who would like to hire a geriatric psychiatrist.

Sean Endicott, vice president of physician search for Irving-based recruiter Martin, Fletcher, said the slight increase in requests for psychiatrists at Martin, Fletcher also may be attributed to the age of the doctors themselves.

AMA statistics show that about 40% of those in practice are 55 years or older and will soon be considering retirement.

"Martin, Fletcher is currently conducting 11 psychiatrist searches," Endicott said. "At this time last year, we were conducting nine."

Just as experienced psychiatrists are retiring their prescription pads, medical students are showing renewed interest in the profession.

Statistics provided by the National Resident Matching Program and reported by Psychiatric News, a national trade journal, show students going into general psychiatry residencies increased from 428 in 1998 to 564 in 2002 — the biggest increase in a decade.

Dr. Paul Mohl, vice chair of education for psychiatry at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center of Dallas, said he's seen the program grow from four students a year in the mid-1990s to eight to 10 students in the last few years, with 60% opting for more training in child, geriatric, addictions or forensic psychiatry.

"The majority stayed in the Dallas-Fort Worth area and found jobs quickly," said Mohl, who also saw new psychiatrists head for less attractive markets such as Lancaster, Pa.; Rochester, N.Y.; and rural Arkansas.

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