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Radiologists thrive in temp positions

The number of physicians working as locum tenens has reached an all-time high, and the call for radiologists specifically has hit a record peak. Recent survey findings suggest that these physicians want rewarding medical careers without the hassles associated with full-time clinical practice.

Radiology temps were the third most-sought-after medical specialty in 2004 (15%), behind anesthesiology (31%) and psychiatry (29%). Radiology was the top temporary staffing need in New York, Florida, and Texas. Other medical specialties in locum tenens demand include, in descending order, family practice physicians, internists, pediatricians, and orthopedic and general surgeons.

The demand for radiology temps has increased steadily, though unspectacularly, over the last four years. But the amount of dollars spent on temporary recruitment has increased significantly, said Dustin Koger, executive vice president for Staff Care in Irving, TX, the company that conducted the survey. The current radiology market represents about \$50 million in temporary staffing spending, a twofold increase over previous years.

"We believe this trend will continue, specifically for radiology," he said.

This year's survey included telephone interviews with nearly 600 physicians from a pool of 7500 locum tenens recruited in 2004. It shows that both older physicians and younger ones with a few years of experience are choosing to work in temporary positions. While the former see temp work as a form of semiretirement, the latter consider it a way to find the practice setting that fits their lifestyle needs, said Joseph Caldwell, executive president of Staff Care. This is the firm's fourth annual national physician locum tenens survey.

The number of physicians working as temps during 2004 reached 34,000, a steady increase compared with 2003 (29,638), 2002 (27,740), and 2001 (26,752). Healthcare institutions spent a record \$3 billion on locum tenens physicians during 2004, more than a doubling of the \$1.25 billion spent in 2001.

Older physicians used to dominate radiology. The move of the early 1990s to boost the number of primary-care physicians resulted in a serious shortage of specialists, including radiologists. Baby boomers now going into retirement will live longer and require greater access to medical care, and the demand for radiologists will continue to grow, Koger said.

Increasing demand alone, however, does not help explain the locum tenens boom. Survey figures suggest physicians' work ethics have changed as well.

In 2001, medical specialists with 21 years or more of experience represented about a quarter of the locum tenens market. By 2004, that number had increased twofold. Currently, nearly half of physicians filling temporary positions have 21 years or more of experience. On the other side of the spectrum, about 15% of temps are younger physicians "test-driving" various practice settings until they find a more permanent position that fills their needs.

Temp physicians asked whether they were currently working on a permanent position or looking for a permanent job responded negatively to both questions (68% and 78%, respectively). When asked if they intend to work on a temporary basis until the opportunity for a permanent position arises, only 18% answered affirmatively, a sharp drop from 33% in 2001. Forty-three percent of respondents plan to work as a temp for more than three years.

Healthcare staffing has been moving steadily toward the temporary model. Some healthcare centers, including correctional and military facilities, have an urgent need for physicians but face recruitment challenges. Compounding the trend, physicians today are more likely to require time off. Temporary work is increasingly seen as an interesting, enjoyable alternative to traditional practice, with far less paperwork and fewer malpractice concerns. Most institutions hire locum tenens to maintain competitive patient care access and quality levels and to prevent revenue loss, Caldwell said.

"In the past, temp doctors were mostly used to fill in for the sick or vacationing physicians. In an era of physician shortages, administrators use temporary physicians in a number of creative ways to maintain patient care and shore up revenues," he said.