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What does it take to break into health care?

While many sectors of the economy are shrinking, health care is growing. And the industry is expected to expand dramatically during the next 20 years as boomers age and increase demand.

The health care industry is on track to open 3 million new jobs in the period from 2006 to 2016—a 22-percent increase.

Bottom line: It's a good time to explore a health care career.

"You have a lot to think about, because there are so many types of health care jobs," says Debra Stock, vice president of member relations at the American Hospital Association.

Positions are open for nurses, physician assistants, audiologists, physical trainers, and dieticians, to name a few. Health care also offers various settings: hospitals, nursing homes, schools, sports organizations, pharmacies, and other environments.

Stock suggests starting your search with the *American Medical Association's Health Care Careers Directory*.

The publication—online at ama-assn.org/go/alliedhealth—explores 81 careers, their job responsibilities, salary averages, and educational requirements.

After you have a sense of what you'd like to do:

Talk to others in the field. If you don't know anyone personally, ask around or contact professional associations that may put you in touch with members. Another option: Post questions to online message boards related to your profession of interest.

Determine your commitment level. A career in the health field usually takes some type of certification or training. Becoming a registered nurse, for example, could take between one and four years full time, depending on your previous course work and the pace of the program.

Look at area colleges. See what nearby community and four-year colleges offer and ask whether the training options will fulfill your state's requirements.

Check program availability. Many nursing programs, for example, have waiting lists. If your local college has one, consider adding your name and taking general education courses in the meantime. Or you may train in a related health care occupation (technician, aide, etc.) and continue to pursue your long-term goal.

Consider how you will pay for the training. Do you have savings or an individual retirement account? Will you need student loans? (See Question 5: How do I finance the transition to an encore career?)



EARNING POWER

U.S. Bureau of Labor Wage Estimates

Annual income (in 2008) Dollars in thousands



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008

Workers over 50 "are reliable, committed, loyal, and methodical, which is especially important in health care, because it results in fewer errors."

DARLENE STONE vice president of human resources, Central Florida Health Alliance



PROFILE Jacquelyn Khan

As she approached retirement age, Jacquelyn Khan realized she should have left her job sooner.

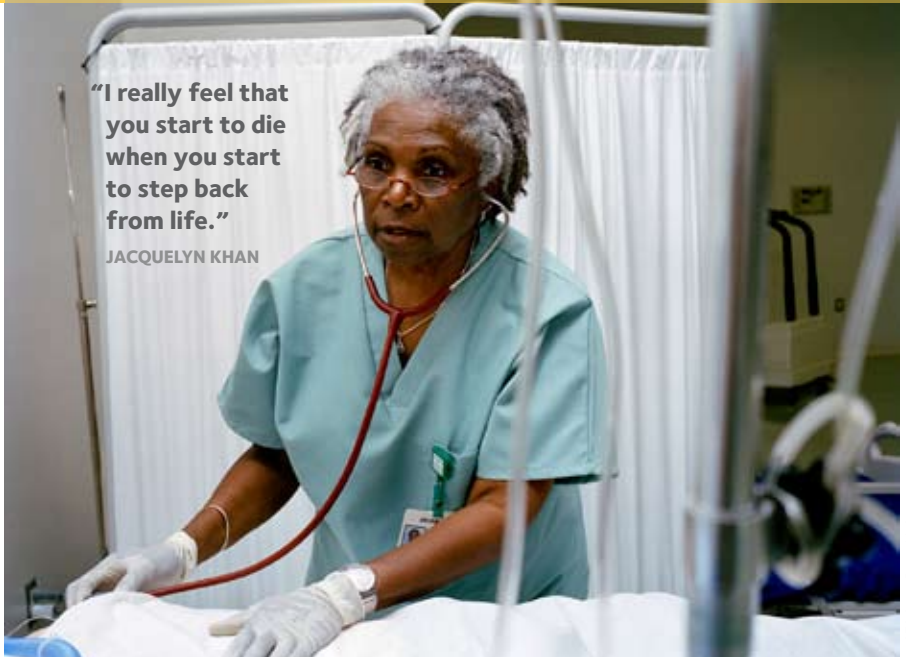
Three decades investigating student absences for Detroit public schools had drained her. More and more, she thought: "I've got to get out. This is really killing me."

Khan had always been interested in health and nutrition. She got it from her mother, a licensed practical nurse. Khan hoped to carry on the tradition while challenging herself.

"I wanted something that was going to keep me on my toes," says Khan, now 68. "I really feel that you start to die when you start to step back from life, when you stop going full speed."

Years earlier, Khan had earned a bachelor's degree in sociology and a master's degree in counseling, but she needed new expertise. While still working for the Detroit schools, she took prerequisite courses for a nursing program at her local community college. She started the program a week before retiring from the school system in 1999.

Since earning her associate's degree, Khan has been a critical care nurse at a Detroit



"I really feel that you start to die when you start to step back from life."

JACQUELYN KHAN

PHOTO BY ALEX HARRIS

hospital, earned her bachelor's degree, and worked as a home health nurse. She now picks up hospital shifts through a nursing agency, typically working two 12-hour days a week. The flexibility allows her to spend winters in Florida.

Khan admits that chronic understaffing can make nursing unpleasant sometimes. But she still loves her work, because it keeps her moving, learning, and interacting. "You have to be extremely flexible," she says, "but it is rewarding."

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Making the transition

Martha Koelemay, 66, is a registered nurse in Pine Ridge, Arkansas.

She became a paramedic in her 40s and took additional courses in her 50s to become a registered nurse. Since graduating, she's worked in an emergency room, a psychiatric ward, and in private homes. Now, she's a night shift nurse in a rural hospital's intensive care unit.

How did you juggle work, school, and family?

I applied for nursing school, got in and kept working. I had the advantage of being by myself with my kids grown. I could come and go, and I could work weird hours. I was stressed, and I was exhausted. But it was only two years.

How did your work experiences prepare you for being a hospital nurse?

In the ambulance I had all the emergency skills, but the day-to-day care of patients was new to me. In home health, you go to people's homes and do maintenance and watch for red flags. When I went to the hospital, I did in-depth patient care, and it was a nice blend with my emergency and home health background.

Were there advantages to becoming a nurse later in life?

I had been places and done things and been exposed to things that [the younger nurses] hadn't. I had seen old people die, you know, aging grandparents. And I think it just made me a better nurse that I was older and lived a good bit of my life before I became a nurse.



INFORMATION

Essential resources

- **NursingLink's Guide to Starting a Nursing Career** nursinglink.com/benefits
- **U.S. Department of Labor's Career Voyages** careervoyages.gov/healthcare-main.cfm
- **ExploreHealthCareers.org — Introduction to Health Professions** explorehealthcareers.org
- **Field Guides to Finding a New Career: Health Care** S.J. Stratford
- **Career Opportunities in Health Care** Shelly Field
- **Careers in Health Care: WetFeet Insider Guide** WetFeet

22%

The increase of new health care-related jobs in the period from 2006 to 2016.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics