

Health Care Turning To Foreign Pharmacists To Fill The Void

by John R. Wilson, Esq. Goff and Wilson, P.A.

Q: Can foreign pharmacists work in the US?

A: Pharmacists represent the third largest health professional group in the US. There are approximately 196,000 active pharmacists, with 60 percent in retail and 29 percent in hospitals. Unfortunately, there is a current shortage of 7,000 pharmacists, with an increase to 30,000 expected by 2010. New legislation pending in Congress is expected to increase this demand by still more.

As the role of the pharmacist increases in volume and range of activities, and the number of prescriptions filled each year increases, the shortage is predicted to reach a critical stage. US pharmacy schools are at maximum capacity and cannot meet the demand. Sign-on bonuses are reaching \$10,000 to \$15,000, with \$25,000 and higher not uncommon.

Many hospitals, community based drug stores and other health care facilities are turning to the foreign pharmacist to answer this void. The cost is approximately the same as a sign-on bonus, which is eliminated. In some cases, the pharmacist can be in the US working in as little as 60 to 90 days, while the average is eight to 10 months.

Prior to arriving in the US, all foreign pharmacists must pass written and oral English language tests as well as the Foreign Pharmacy Graduate Equivalency Exam (FPGEE). Once the pharmacist passes this exam, a temporary license is issued by the state where the pharmacist will work. The pharmacist would then enter the US on an H visa. The pharmacist's spouse and children may also enter the US.

With extensions, the H visa is good for a period of six years, during which time permanent residency may be possible. When the pharmacist enters the US s/he will complete an internship, as all pharmacists are required to do. Once the internship is completed, the pharmacist passes the state licensing exam and works as an unsupervised pharmacist. ■

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