



## ANOTHER OPINION

# Creating a strong Nebraska health care team

By Kyle P. Meyer  
and Gregory M. Karst

One of the hallmark traits of Nebraskans is their knowledge of the game of football, and their understanding of the various roles played by all members of the team.

Everyone knows the role of the quarterback or running back, but only the most knowledgeable fans, like those in Nebraska, understand the value of the various duties performed by the offensive line or special team players. So it is with the health care team; everyone knows about the role of the physician in "quarterbacking" the health care team, and the significant role a nurse plays in delivering patient care; but what about the other members of the team, often referred to as "allied health" professionals?

As one component of the University of Nebraska's "Building a Healthier Nebraska" Initiative, Sen. Galen Hadley recently introduced LB 1055. The bill seeks \$19 million to build a new facility on the University of Nebraska Kearney campus to house the University of Nebraska Medical Center's College of Nursing Kearney division and to expand several of UNMC's allied health profession education programs to UNK.

LB 1055 represents a decisive step toward addressing current and projected workforce demands for allied health professionals, with an emphasis on meeting the needs of rural Nebraska.

For 40 years, the UNMC School of Allied Health Professions in Omaha has



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educated Nebraska's allied health professionals, but shortages still exist in rural Nebraska. Student interest in allied health profession careers is high, but applicants greatly exceed the number of students that can currently be accepted. Expanding allied health education to the UNK campus will allow students intent on providing health care in a rural setting the opportunity to obtain a state-of-the-art health professions education without the necessity of relocating to Omaha.

It has been estimated that as many as 60 percent of the U.S. health care workforce are allied health practitioners. Generally speaking, these practitioners provide direct patient care, or they operate today's sophisticated laboratory and imaging equipment to obtain essential diagnostic data.

By 2018 the national employment demand for many of the allied health professions is projected to

increase significantly. For example, the demand for physician assistants and physical therapists is expected to increase by 39 percent and 30 percent, respectively. Meeting this demand will become increasingly critical as we respond to an aging population. In rural Nebraska, the population over 65 years of age is already greater than that of the U.S. average, and by 2030 this population is projected to increase an additional 62 percent.

An estimated 70 percent of all medical decisions are based on laboratory results, making the role played by allied health professionals like clinical laboratory scientists and cytotechnologists, crucial for obtaining accurate data for physicians to use in making a diagnosis and monitoring the effectiveness of treatment. Similarly, the value of imaging data, such as mammograms, X-rays, ultrasound, bone, and MRI scans, coupled with the rapid advances in imaging technology, make the availability of allied health professionals, like radiographers, sonographers, nuclear medicine and magnetic resonance imaging technologists, equally important.

Approximately 80 percent of older adults have one chronic condition, and 50 percent have at least two such conditions. Allied health professionals such as physical therapists, medical nutritionists, and occupational therapists have the knowledge and skills to promote healthy aging and to care for persons with these chronic conditions.

Effective rehabilitation also maximizes many

surgical outcomes associated with aging, such as total joint replacement surgeries. Total joint replacements are projected to increase nationwide from a current annual level of 600,000 to more than 4 million in 2030, and well-trained professionals are needed to adequately rehabilitate those patients.

Practitioners like physician assistants will increasingly extend the reach of physicians by providing increased access to high quality medical care. The Association of American Medical Colleges predicts a shortage of 45,000 primary care physicians over the next decade and has called for more effective use of physician assistants to deal with this impending crisis. Physician assistants, under the supervision of a physician, perform examinations, diagnose illnesses, order and interpret lab tests, and develop treatment plans. Older adults already account for almost one-third of visits to physician assistants.

Just as the success of "Big Red" football depends on skilled contributions by all members of the team, the health of Nebraskans depends on training adequate numbers of all members of the health care team. I thank University of Nebraska President James B. Milliken and Sen. Hadley for recognizing the unique roles played by allied health professionals and applaud them for their forward thinking vision to create a strong health care team for all citizens of Nebraska.

*To learn more about the allied health profession education programs offered*

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