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News Release

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North Carolina sees growth in supply of anesthesia providers

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CHAPEL HILL -- Significant growth has occurred in the number of health professionals who provide anesthesia services across North Carolina, a new University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill study shows.

Between 1992 and 2002, the number of certified registered nurse anesthetists (CRNAs) -- nurses with advance training in anesthesia care -- grew from 998 to 1,445, Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research investigators found. That increase was almost 45 percent.

The supply of anesthesiologists rose almost 49 percent, from 518 in 1992 to 770 in 2002, according to a Sheps Center report. Growth in the supply has not been balanced across North Carolina's rural and urban counties, however, researchers found. Anesthesiologists increased in number more than twice as fast in non-metropolitan counties as CRNAs did during the period -- 76.8 percent versus 37.4 percent.

Not surprisingly, the majority of anesthesia providers worked in urban and surrounding counties.

"Overall, only one in five CRNAs and anesthesiologists practice primarily in rural areas," said Susan Dyson, research associate at the Sheps Center and report author. "Eighteen of North Carolina's 100 counties did not have an anesthesia provider reporting a primary practice location in 2002."

Dyson's report, "Trends in the Supply of Certified Registered Nurse Anesthetists in North Carolina, 1992-2002" examines changes in supply, distribution, education and demographics of anesthesia providers.

"The supply of anesthesia providers in North Carolina is fairly stable," said Dr. Thomas C. Ricketts, deputy director of the Sheps Center and report co-author. "There have been changes that reflect market pressures and changes in payment policies, but these have not caused serious dislocations."

The study also revealed a dramatic positive change in the educational preparation of CRNAs since 1992, she said. New national educational standards require a master's degree to become a CRNA, and the percentage of the workforce holding the degree jumped from about 8 percent in 1992 to 43.2 percent in 2002.

"Over the 10-year span, the average age of certified nurse anesthetists rose from 44 to 46.5," Dyson said. "CRNAs working in rural counties were significantly older than those employed in urban N.C. counties. In 2002, the average age of CRNAs practicing in rural areas was 50.3 years, compared with their urban counterparts, who averaged 45.6 years old."

The North Carolina Health Professions Data System at the Sheps Center produced the report. Dyson gathered her data from

the N.C. Medical Board and the N.C. Board of Nursing.

Graduate research assistant Trish Tempio is a co-author. Ricketts is also associate professor of health policy and administration at the UNC School of Public Health.

An electronic copy of a fact sheet is available online at www.shepscenter.unc.edu/hp.

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