

myth busting

Practicing Medicine in Rural America

1 Myth #1 — You won't make enough money

This perception stops many physicians from seriously considering rural medical practice before they even get to the other concerns on the list.

Fact: On average, rural physician incomes don't differ significantly from those of their urban colleagues. In fact, they often come out ahead in terms of real purchasing power.

Results of an early-summer 2007 physician salary survey conducted by LocumTenens.com indicate that the average rural physician salary is slightly higher than the combined average metro/suburban salary (\$241,690 in rural areas versus \$240,029 in metro/suburban areas). These statistics are based on almost 2,400 physician responses to the physician survey.

In LocumTenens.com's August 2007 physician survey on rural medical practice, 57% of the almost-800 respondents who had practiced medicine in a rural area said the profitability is about the same there as (35%), or more profitable than (23%), urban or suburban practice. Another 14% said that, "The greater purchasing power in a rural community compensates for the lower profitability of rural practice."

Moreover, a study published in January 2005 by the Center for Studying Health System Change (HSC) indicated that "average physician incomes in rural and urban areas do not differ significantly, even after accounting for differences in physician work effort, specialty, and other physician practice characteristics. After accounting for the local cost of living, rural physician incomes on average provide about 13 percent more purchasing power than urban physician incomes."

2 Myth #2 — You'll be on call 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (so you won't have time for yourself or your family).

Among almost 800 responding U.S. physicians who had practiced medicine in rural areas, 84% said that rural practice is about the same as (47%), or less frustrating than (37%), larger-city practice. Sixty-one percent of physician survey respondents said the pace of rural practice is slower, while another 31% said it was about the same as in urban or suburban practice.

When LocumTenens.com asked physicians with rural practice experience about lifestyle preferences between rural and larger-city practice, approximately 30% of respondents said they preferred rural life more, while another 16% said that life is about the same regardless of where they live.

If you live in a large metropolitan area, you likely appreciate another key reason why rural physicians tend to come out ahead of their urban and suburban colleagues in the amount of personal and family time available to them: commuting time.

Fact: Even when the possibility of a heavier call schedule is considered, many rural physicians still win the personal/family time game because they aren't spending an hour or two or three each day getting to and from work—not to mention the frustration they avoid in the process.

A 2007 study conducted by Bizjournals indicates that U.S. workers drive an average of 25.07 minutes each way daily to and from their jobs. That translates to 209 hours of commuting per year. The worst U.S. market for commuters is the New York City area, where a typical morning commute takes 36 minutes and where 19.4% of commuters have an a.m. journey of 60 minutes or more.

3 Myth #3 — You can't possibly know enough. (You'll be isolated and "in over your head" professionally.)

A December 2006 article in Rural Roads, the monthly magazine of the National Rural Health Association, indicates that professional networking actually tends to be easier for rural physicians. The author interviewed physicians and psychologists as the basis of a journalistic series on transitioning from urban to rural life. This installment highlighted the following professional-development advantages of rural practice:

- Career advancement may happen earlier in one's career in a rural setting than it would in a metropolitan area (where there is more competition and, often, lower pay for entry-level positions).
- In rural areas it is much easier to network through statewide professional organizations and have an impact on political decisions affecting one's profession.
- The need to serve a broader population provides ongoing challenge and intellectual stimulation that prevents physicians and other professionals from getting bored with their work or stale in their professional development.

Fact: Because specialists usually are in short supply in rural communities, country doctors tend to be broader generalists, stretching beyond their comfort zones to become competent in a wider range of areas than their primary care colleagues in the city.

