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Small towns a tough sell for doctors

By DORSEY GRIFFITH

Bee staff writer

Michael O. Sullivan can't offer potential physician recruits ocean views or crime-free neighborhoods. He can't even offer a medical setting replete with fancy, high-tech equipment.

As he recruits for his Merced Family Health Centers clinics, O'Sullivan competes with booming health maintenance organizations, fancy hospitals and lucrative group practices for the services of primary-care physicians.

Family practitioners, general internists and pediatricians are the backbone of medical care in small cities and towns, but there are not nearly enough of them, medical officials acknowledge. Recruiting them to the Northern San Joaquin Valley requires clever salesmanship and attractive incentives.

Sullivan tells doctors that if they work at one of his rural clinics, their huge medical school loans will be repaid and that they likely will have the chance to manage a clinic.

Underlying the competition is one piece of medical reality: Too few medical students want to be-

come family doctors.

Many medical schools steer their students toward narrow areas of care, in part because many faculty members are themselves specialists. Furthermore, the pay is better; specialists often make \$100,000 a year more than family doctors.

Last year, 19 percent of medical students chose to take general medicine, up one-third from 1992. But the steady erosion in the supply of new family physicians has taken a toll. Three decades ago, 43 percent of U.S. doctors were generalists. Now it is 30 percent.

Beverly Finley, chief executive officer of Stanislaus Medical Center, can't offer marble-laden halls at her county hospital. And she can't boast patients who can pay any or all of their bills.

So Finley tells recruits that they might want to teach medical residents one day and see patients the rest of the week. "Physicians do like to teach," she said. "It's stimulating intellectually and keeps their skills up."

With low supply and high demand, a primary care doctor

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ten can pick from literally hundreds of offers coast to coast. Myriad financial arrangements are possible — solo set-ups, group practices, employment by a hospital, affiliation with managed-care plans.

Almost every deal guarantees a set salary until the doctor gets established. Typically, the pay for family physicians ranges from \$80,000 a year to \$200,000 or more.

At Gould Medical Foundation, a large medical group in Modesto, physician recruiter Cindy Vontek said she can't tout a sophisticated, urban atmosphere where a couple can catch a foreign film any week-night and top it off with a cappuccino at a sidewalk cafe in a downtown brimming with activity.

So Vontek, in a video specially designed to attract doctors, hawks Modesto's proximity to cities like San Francisco and recreation areas like Lake Tahoe. The video also highlights Modesto's tree-lined streets, Graffiti USA, its good schools and rich farmland.

"Recruitment of physicians, especially primary care physicians, is exceedingly difficult," Sullivan said. "You have to match the backgrounds of these doctors with your community."

Since many doctors themselves were reared in urban or suburban settings, he said, they often aren't comfortable settling in rural areas where most clients are poor.

And most medical graduates have learned to depend on high-tech equipment to do their doctoring. At Merced Family Health Centers clinics, doctors depend more on the basics of medicine.

'I believe our mission helps with recruitment'

— Michael O. Sullivan,
Merced Family Health Centers

"I believe our mission helps with recruitment," Sullivan said. "We look for people who do have a sincere interest in helping underserved populations in underserved areas."

Finley agrees. "Some HMOs and private systems can bring them in at a salary 25 percent higher than we can," she said. "You have to recruit people who want to remain in the public service sector. It becomes a matter of values."

Finley has an advantage in that about half the doctors in the hospital's residency program stay on as staff physicians once they graduate. But finding like-minded doctors to fill the gap can be difficult.

Three months ago, Finley decided to hire a recruiting agency to give her a hand. The agency's take for a successful recruit: \$15,000 to \$25,000.

Vontek said finding good primary care doctors has become easier in the past year, possibly because more young doctors know that managed-care groups like Gould are the future, regardless of what happens with reform efforts in Washington, D.C.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.