

# Health Care CAREERS



# Technology and the Workforce

Health care careers in 2026 are being shaped by a convergence of technological innovation, workforce challenges and rising demand for specialized care.

Industry reports point to a strong labor market alongside significant structural shifts in how care is delivered and who delivers it.

According to U.S. News & World Report, the top health care jobs for 2026 reflect both demand and earning potential. The list includes nurse practitioner, physician assistant, speech-language pathologist, respiratory therapist, nurse anesthetist, occupational therapist, dental hygienist, psychiatrist, ophthalmic medical technician, and oral and maxillofacial surgeon. Many of these roles emphasize advanced training, patient interaction and specialized expertise.

## TECHNOLOGY AND SPECIALIZATION DRIVE GROWTH

Educational institutions and industry analysts highlight the growing influence of technology. Capella University reports health care careers in 2026 are defined by rapid integration of artificial intelligence, along with increased demand for specialized roles in behavioral health, diagnostics and virtual care.

The labor market remains strong. Capella notes 37,000 new health care jobs were added in April alone, driven by demand for nurses, advanced practitioners and IT specialists. As digital tools expand, employers are seeking professionals who can combine clinical



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knowledge with technical fluency.

This shift is fueling growth in areas such as telehealth, data analytics and remote patient monitoring, broadening the scope of traditional health care roles and creating new career pathways.

## WORKFORCE CHALLENGES AND EVOLVING CARE MODELS

At the same time, the industry continues to face workforce pressures. The American Hospital Association reports that longstanding shortages, intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, are being compounded by an aging population, ongoing turnover and burnout

among health care workers.

These challenges are affecting all levels of the workforce, from physicians and nurses to support staff. In response, hospitals and health systems are accelerating strategies to recruit, retain and train workers more effectively.

Efforts include expanding team-based care models, investing in workforce upskilling and redesigning roles to reduce administrative burdens. Organizations are creating new positions in digital health, virtual care, cybersecurity and care coordination, reflecting the growing complexity of modern health systems.

## A FIELD IN TRANSITION

Health care in 2026 is both resilient and in transition. While demand for services continues to rise, the way those services are delivered is evolving quickly. Employers are balancing the adoption of new technologies with the need to support a diverse, multigenerational workforce.

For job seekers, the outlook remains strong, particularly for those willing to pursue specialized training and adapt to new tools and care models. As the field continues to evolve, careers that blend clinical expertise, technological skill and collaborative practice are likely to be among the most in demand.

# Bridging Gaps in Care and Access

Community health workers are vital connectors in the health care system, helping individuals navigate services, access care and address social factors that influence overall well-being.

Often based in the communities they serve, these professionals build trust with patients and families by meeting them where they are — culturally, linguistically and geographically. They work in a range of settings, including public health departments, nonprofit organizations, clinics and hospitals, focusing on outreach, education and care coordination.

## NAVIGATING SYSTEMS AND BUILDING TRUST

One of the primary roles of community health workers is to help people understand and access health care services.

This can include assisting with scheduling appointments, explaining insurance coverage, connecting patients to transportation or helping them find affordable medications.

Because they are often members of the same communities they serve,



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community health workers are uniquely positioned to build relationships and foster trust. They may conduct home visits, lead workshops or provide one-on-one guidance, helping individuals feel more comfortable engaging with the health care system.

Their work frequently extends beyond medical care. Community health workers help address social determinants of health, such as housing instability, food insecurity and access to education, recognizing that these factors play a significant role in health outcomes.

## IMPROVING OUTCOMES THROUGH EDUCATION AND ADVOCACY

Education is a key component of the role. Community health workers provide information on disease prevention, chronic condition management and healthy lifestyle choices. They may support patients with conditions such as diabetes, hypertension or asthma by reinforcing care plans and encouraging adherence to treatment.

In addition, they serve as advocates, helping patients communicate with health care providers and ensuring that

their concerns are understood. They relay community needs and feedback to health organizations, helping shape programs that are more responsive and effective.

## EXPANDING OPPORTUNITIES IN PUBLIC HEALTH

As health systems increasingly focus on preventive care and health equity, demand for community health workers continues to grow. Many organizations are integrating these roles into care teams to improve patient engagement and reduce unnecessary hospital visits.

Training requirements vary by state and employer, but programs often include coursework in public health, communication and care coordination. Certification options are available in some regions.

For those interested in a career that combines outreach, education and advocacy, community health work offers an opportunity to make a meaningful difference at the local level. By connecting people to resources and supporting them through complex systems, these professionals help create healthier, more resilient communities.

# Compacts: Mobility and Opportunity

Licensure compacts are reshaping the health care workforce by allowing professionals to practice across state lines more easily, increasing job flexibility and helping address staffing shortages.

These agreements, adopted by multiple states, enable licensed clinicians to provide services in participating states without obtaining a separate license for each one. As demand for health care workers grows, compacts are becoming an important tool for improving access to care while creating new opportunities for professionals.

## HOW LICENSURE COMPACTS WORK

Licensure compacts function through mutual recognition. A clinician holds a primary license in their home state but can practice in other member states, either physically or through telehealth, as long as they meet compact requirements.

Several professions have established compacts, including nursing, physical therapy, occupational therapy and emergency medical services. The Nurse Licensure Compact (NLC), one of the most widely adopted, allows registered



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nurses and licensed practical nurses to practice in participating states. As of early 2026, 43 jurisdictions are part of the NLC with a bill pending in one other state to join. The Interstate Medical Licensure Compact offers an expedited pathway for physicians to obtain licenses in multiple states. As of May 2026, it manages compacts with 38 states, D.C. and Guam.

Other compacts include the Physical Therapy Compact

with 39 states and Psychology Interjurisdictional Compact (PSYPACT) in 40 states.

Each compact has its own eligibility standards, which may include background checks, continuing education requirements and adherence to the practice laws of the state where the patient is located.

## BENEFITS FOR WORKERS AND EMPLOYERS

For health care profession-

als, licensure compacts reduce administrative barriers and costs associated with obtaining multiple state licenses. This increased mobility allows clinicians to pursue travel assignments, respond to short-term staffing needs or expand telehealth services across state lines.

Employers also benefit. Health systems can more quickly recruit and deploy staff, particularly in rural or underserved areas where

shortages are most acute. During public health emergencies, compacts make it easier to move qualified workers to areas experiencing surges in demand.

Telehealth has further amplified the value of compacts. Providers can reach patients in multiple states without navigating a patchwork of licensing requirements, improving continuity of care and expanding access to specialized services.

## CHALLENGES AND FUTURE GROWTH

While licensure compacts offer clear advantages, they present challenges. Not all states participate in every compact, creating a mixed landscape that can still limit mobility. Differences in scope-of-practice laws and regulations require clinicians to stay informed about the rules in each state where they practice.

Despite these hurdles, momentum is growing. More states are joining existing compacts, and additional professions are exploring similar agreements. Policymakers and industry leaders view compacts as a key strategy for modernizing the health care workforce.

As health care continues to evolve, licensure compacts are likely to play an increasingly important role. By reducing barriers and enabling greater flexibility, they help professionals pursue broader career opportunities while supporting a more responsive and connected system of care.

# Advancing Preventive Oral Care

Dental hygienists and other expanded dental professionals are at the forefront of preventive care.

They help patients maintain oral health while playing an increasingly important role in early disease detection and education.

Working in dental offices, public health clinics, schools and mobile care units, these professionals focus on preventing oral disease before it requires more complex treatment. Their responsibilities often include cleaning teeth, examining patients for signs of oral conditions and educating individuals on proper hygiene practices.

## A FOCUS ON PREVENTION AND EARLY DETECTION

Preventive care is the cornerstone of dental hygiene. Hygienists remove plaque and tartar, apply fluoride treatments and take dental X-rays to identify issues that may not be visible during a routine exam. They screen for early signs of gum disease, cavities and even oral cancers.

In many practices, hygienists are the first to notice subtle changes in a patient's oral health. By identifying concerns early, they help ensure that patients receive timely treatment, reducing the risk of more serious complications.

Patient education is another



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key component of the role. Hygienists guide patients on brushing and flossing techniques, discuss the effect of diet on oral health and help individuals develop habits that support long-term wellness.

## EXPANDING RESPONSIBILITIES IN MODERN PRACTICE

In recent years, the scope of practice for dental hygienists has grown in many states. Some are trained to administer local anesthesia, place temporary fillings or sealants

and provide nonsurgical periodontal therapy. Expanded dental roles, such as dental therapists and advanced dental hygiene practitioners, are emerging to improve access to care, particularly in underserved areas.

These professionals may perform additional procedures under the supervision of a dentist or, in some cases, practice more independently depending on state regulations. Their expanded responsibilities help dental teams operate more efficiently while

increasing the number of patients who can receive care.

## EDUCATION AND CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

Becoming a dental hygienist typically requires an associate degree in dental hygiene, though bachelor's and master's programs are also available. All states require licensure, which includes passing written and clinical examinations.

As the demand for preventive services grows, so do career opportunities. Dental

hygienists may work in traditional clinical settings or pursue roles in public health, education, research or corporate consulting within the dental industry.

For those interested in combining clinical skills with patient interaction and education, dental hygiene and expanded dental roles offer a stable and evolving career path. By emphasizing prevention and early intervention, these professionals play a vital role in improving overall health, one patient at a time.

# Lactation Consultants

Breastfeeding is rarely as easy as it looks.

It may be a natural thing mothers have done for millennia, but sometimes babies don't want to latch on and mothers need support from those who understand the ins and outs of breastfeeding in modern society.

Lactation consultants are health care professionals who specialize in supporting infant feeding, helping families navigate breastfeeding and other feeding choices while promoting maternal and infant well-being.

Working in hospitals, clinics, public health programs and private practice, these specialists provide evidence-based guidance during a critical period of early development. Their work often begins shortly after birth, assisting with latching techniques, milk supply concerns and feeding schedules, but it can extend for weeks or months as families adjust to changing needs.

## GUIDANCE AT A CRITICAL TIME

The early days of infant feeding can be both rewarding and challenging. Lactation consultants help parents address common concerns such as difficulty with latch, low milk production, pain during feeding or infants who are not gaining weight as expected.

They support families in a range of circumstances, including premature births, multiple births and situations where



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medical conditions affect feeding. In addition to hands-on assistance, consultants provide education about infant hunger cues, pumping, milk storage and transitioning back to work.

Importantly, their role is not limited to breastfeeding. Lactation consultants offer nonjudgmental support for all feeding

choices, including combination feeding or formula use, helping families make informed decisions that align with their needs and circumstances.

## TRAINING AND CERTIFICATION

Many lactation consultants hold the credential of Interna-

tional Board Certified Lactation Consultant (IBCLC), which requires specialized coursework, clinical experience and passing a comprehensive exam. Candidates often come from backgrounds in nursing, midwifery, nutrition or other health-related fields, though pathways exist

for those entering the profession from other disciplines.

Strong communication skills are essential. Consultants work closely with new parents, often during emotionally and physically demanding moments, and must provide clear, compassionate guidance. Cultural competence and an understanding of diverse family structures play a key role in delivering inclusive care.

## EXPANDING ROLE IN COMMUNITY HEALTH

As awareness grows about the long-term health benefits associated with breastfeeding, demand for lactation support continues to increase. Hospitals frequently integrate consultants into maternity and neonatal care teams, while community-based programs extend services to underserved populations.

Lactation consultants may collaborate with pediatricians, obstetricians and public health professionals to address broader issues such as maternal mental health, nutrition and health equity. Telehealth has further expanded access, allowing consultants to reach families who might not otherwise receive support.

For those interested in a career that blends clinical knowledge, education and one-on-one support, lactation consulting offers an opportunity to make a meaningful effects during one of life's earliest and most formative stages.

# Simulation Specialists

Health care simulation specialists play a critical role behind the scenes of modern medical education.

They design realistic training environments where students and professionals can practice clinical skills without risk to patients.

From hospital-based simulation centers to university labs, these specialists create immersive scenarios that mirror real-life medical situations. Using advanced mannequins, virtual reality tools and standardized patient actors, they help learners build confidence and competence before entering clinical settings.

## BUILDING REALISTIC LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

At the heart of the profession is the ability to replicate the complexity of patient care. Simulation specialists program high-fidelity mannequins to exhibit symptoms such as irregular heart rhythms, breathing difficulties or changes in vital signs. They also design case scenarios that require learners to assess, diagnose and respond under pressure.

In 2004, professionals founded the Society for Simulation in Healthcare which said it “seeks to improve performance and reduce errors in patient care through the use of simulation.”

Beyond technical setup, specialists must understand



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clinical workflows and collaborate closely with faculty, physicians and nurses. Their goal is to ensure that each simulation aligns with educational objectives and reflects current medical standards.

## A BLEND OF TECHNOLOGY AND TEACHING

The role requires a unique mix of skills. Simulation

specialists often come from backgrounds in health care, education, information technology or engineering. Many positions require at least a bachelor's degree, while advanced roles may call for specialized certification in simulation education, such as the one offered at Harvard's Center for Medical Simulation. Many colleges and

universities offer fellowship programs that last from six months to a year, according to National Center for Biotechnology Information.

Technical expertise is essential. Specialists operate audiovisual systems, manage simulation software and troubleshoot equipment in real time.

At the same time, they

facilitate debriefing sessions after simulations, guiding participants through reflection and discussion to reinforce learning outcomes.

Communication skills are equally important. Specialists must translate complex clinical concepts into structured learning experiences and adapt scenarios based on the needs of different learners, from nursing students to experienced physicians.

## GROWING DEMAND IN HEALTH EDUCATION

As patient safety and quality of care remain top priorities, the demand for simulation-based training continues to grow. Health systems increasingly rely on simulation labs to train staff in new procedures, test emergency response protocols and improve teamwork across disciplines.

This growth has expanded career opportunities for simulation specialists in hospitals, academic institutions and private training organizations. The field also offers room for advancement into leadership roles, curriculum design or research focused on improving simulation practices.

For those interested in combining technology, education and health care, simulation offers a dynamic and impactful career path.

By preparing clinicians before they ever step into a patient's room, these specialists help ensure safer, more effective care across the health system.

# Precision, Teamwork in the OR

Surgical technologists are essential members of the operating room team.

They ensure procedures run smoothly by preparing instruments, maintaining sterile environments and anticipating the needs of surgeons in real time.

Often working in hospitals and outpatient surgical centers, these professionals operate behind the scenes, yet their influence is central to patient safety. From the moment a procedure is scheduled to the final count of instruments, surgical technologists help create the conditions necessary for successful outcomes.

## SETTING THE STAGE FOR SURGERY

Before an operation begins, surgical technologists prepare the operating room by sterilizing equipment, arranging instruments and ensuring that all necessary supplies are in place. They check that surgical tools are functioning properly and verify that sterile protocols are followed.

Once the procedure is underway, they assist by passing instruments to surgeons, holding retractors and managing surgical materials such as sponges and sutures. Maintaining a sterile field is a constant priority, requiring close attention to detail and strict adherence to infection control standards.

They perform instrument and sponge counts before and after surgery to ensure that



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nothing is left behind, a critical safety measure in every procedure.

## ANTICIPATING NEEDS IN REAL TIME

Surgical technologists must think several steps ahead. By understanding the flow of different types of procedures, they can anticipate what a surgeon will need next and respond quickly, often without verbal instruction.

This level of coordination has been compared to choreography, with each member of the surgical team moving in sync. Communication, focus and the ability to remain calm under pressure are essential traits, particularly during complex or emergency surgeries.

Technologists work closely with nurses and anesthesiology staff, contributing to a collaborative environment where timing and precision are vital.

## TRAINING AND CAREER PATHWAYS

Most surgical technologists complete a postsecondary certificate or associate degree program, followed by certification through a recognized credentialing organization. Coursework typically includes anatomy, microbiology, surgical procedures and sterile techniques.

As demand for surgical services grows, so do opportuni-

ties in the field. Experienced technologists may specialize in areas such as cardiovascular or orthopedic surgery or advance into roles in surgical assisting, education or management.

For those interested in a fast-paced health care career that combines technical skill with teamwork, surgical technology offers a unique opportunity to support patient care at one of its most critical moments.