The Association of Medical Colleges predicts that the United States could face a shortage of up to 150,000 doctors over the next 15 years. Experts say that the greatest demand will be for primary care providers. In response to this demand, the healthcare industry will need to look for alternative ways to bring mid-level, primary care to a growing population.

“We are looking at a serious physician shortage in the future,” said Karen Poisker, vice president of Patient Care Services at Peninsula Regional Medical Center (PRMC). “It takes 12 years to become a primary care physician, and there is already a lack of providers,” she added. To address the ever-increasing need for primary care practitioners, Poisker believes that the role of the nurse practitioner will expand. “By 2015, nurse practitioners (NPs) will need to have doctoral degrees,” she said.

Salisbury University is leading that charge in the region. This fall, SU rolls out its first doctoral program, the Doctor of Nursing Practice (D.N.P.). The University hopes that the program will help address the need for a more educated nursing workforce. “The D.N.P. has become the expected career development path for nursing practitioner professionals,” explained Dr. Lisa Seldomridge, SU Nursing Department chair. “In the future, having a doctoral degree will be a requirement for those in advanced nursing practice, including NPs. Even if we double the number of medical schools, we still will not produce enough doctors to meet the needs of the population. The D.N.P. will help prepare leaders in nursing practice to guide future healthcare reform,” she said.

The curriculum, which was developed by Dr. Molly Parsons, director of SU Graduate and Second Degree Nursing Programs, focuses on using evidence-based practice and technology to guide administrative and clinical decisions, as well as policy development. SU’s D.N.P. is one of only three in the State of Maryland and the only such program on the Delmarva Peninsula.

The D.N.P. program, which takes three years to complete in a cohort sequence, is a 38-credit post-master’s option for students in advanced practice roles, such as nurse practitioners, clinical nurse specialists, nurse midwives, nurse anesthetists, nurse administrators and nurse educators. Students with bachelor’s degrees can complete the D.N.P. in five years. The curriculum includes some hybrid and distance learning courses, making the program a viable option for working professionals. While not as research focused as a traditional Ph.D., D.N.P. candidates will each complete a research project as part of their graduation requirement.

“When looking at ways to address the impending healthcare shortages, it just makes sense to focus on healthcare training programs that can educate mid-level providers in five years instead of 10 or 12,” said Seldomridge. “Nurses traditionally work closely with patients and are extremely well suited to guide and lead positive changes focusing on improving patient care. Nurse practitioners excel at treating the whole individual rather than just assessing the symptom,” she added.

Seldomridge sees the future of medicine going in the direction of more nurse practitioners with high-level degrees treating common medical conditions, while physicians focus on researching and treating unusual conditions and providing critical care.

The Changing Landscape of Healthcare

Critics of D.N.P. programs say that a nurse with a doctoral degree will confuse patients, and that most patients will choose an M.D. over a D.N.P. in a private practice. “There will always be people who say that, but
there will be just as many who will prefer the D.N.P. provider who views the patient as a whole human being, not just ‘the sore throat in room four,’” Seldomridge said.

There are a number of educational incentives available for practitioners who agree to practice in an under-served area such as Somerset County. The practitioner who runs the clinic becomes an important part of the community. Smith Island is another example of how the D.N.P. can meet a critical need for quality, accessible care on Maryland’s Lower Eastern Shore. The only other option available to island residents is to take a ferry over to the mainland. “For these residents, if seeing a practitioner instead of a physician means that you will actually get to see somebody, that’s huge,” Seldomridge said. “The stereotypical notion is that the nurse is someone who checks your blood pressure, not someone who can prescribe medication or suture a wound,” she added. “The D.N.P. prepares nurses to provide care at a much higher level.”

The doctoral nurse practitioner is not meant to replace the primary care physician. A nurse practitioner will always have a different area of expertise than an M.D. “The State of Maryland is very clear about the scope of practice, and there are situations that a nurse practitioner could and should be managing,” Seldomridge explained. The D.N.P. will offer nursing professions career opportunities in education and private practice at a mid-level care facility such as a clinic or in hospitals.

**Nurse Practitioners as Agents of Change**

Healthcare organizations, including community hospitals seeking special designation such as Magnet status, will be focused on employing nurses with advanced degrees. Magnet status is awarded to hospitals by the American Nurses Credentialing Center, an affiliate of the American Nurses Association. To achieve Magnet status, a facility must have a percentage of its staff educated at the master’s level and generate research projects as well as a number of other nursing quality indicators. There is a growing body of research to suggest that patient outcomes in Magnet hospitals are better. According to Seldomridge, Magnet facilities report fewer deaths, infections and post-operative complications. “So in places where people have several facilities from which to pick, Magnet certification attracts patients,” she said. These hospitals also look for staff with enough of a research background to be able to help them with research projects. “Although the D.N.P. is not a research-based degree like a Ph.D., you do develop research skills. It is unusual to have nurses with doctoral degrees, so the D.N.P. will give graduates a competitive edge,” Seldomridge explained.

Nationwide, research is a growing trend in the nursing profession, and SU is providing local support in this endeavor. Ph.D. faculty currently sit on the research councils of Atlantic General Hospital, Shore Health System as well as PRMC. “We are on a Magnet journey, and one challenge we face as a community hospital is the emphasis on research, specifically in the area of nurse practice development. Specifically, we are exploring procedures that improve patient outcomes,” explained Poisker. “When you look at how much the healthcare industry is changing, we really need well-educated people who can offer expertise on best practices for improved patient outcomes and for improving the patient experience,” she added.

The University has a long-standing relationship with PRMC. Many of SU’s nursing and health sciences students complete their clinical rotations at PRMC and go on to begin their careers there. “We are very fortunate to have this relationship with Salisbury University. In the future, we will collaborate on program development and help SU design some of the sub-specialties as the D.N.P. program evolves,” Poisker said.

The incoming D.N.P. cohort consists of 12 students, but SU hopes to eventually grow the program to a cohort of 15. Seldomridge describes the group as, “very diverse; we have students from many different backgrounds pursuing different career paths.” In interviewing potential D.N.P. students, Seldomridge said the incoming candidates all have clearly defined goals regarding their research projects and career paths. “We were looking for people who could demonstrate a deep commitment to the program and to the profession,” she commented.

Seldomridge said that most people who seek a D.N.P. have a specific goal in mind such as becoming a clinical educator or setting up a private practice, but there are some who seek this degree for more intrinsic rewards such as personal development. “Finally, the world is realizing that if you have a better educated workforce, things turn out better.”