HAVE A PLAN

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THE 38 CAREER & TECHNICAL COLLEGES DOING THE MOST FOR VETERANS

OUR 2014 LIST

MY GREAT NEW LIFE
DUCK BOAT CAPTAIN HAS FUN ON LAND & SEA

A SUPPLEMENT TO MILITARY TIMES
Better data = better medical care

Sometimes the stars align just right. They did for Matt Walker, 30, who left the Navy as a petty officer third class in 2007. Since getting out, his military work as a hospital corpsman has dovetailed neatly with his newfound passion: computers.

“When I got out of the military, I got on a technology kick,” he said. “I started learning programming, learning about computers. But I had already spent all that time specializing in medical topics, so I looked for a way to put them together.”

He found a way in medical informatics, which he is studying online through Western Governors University. And it looks like a wise choice. With new rules requiring medical offices to adopt electronic business practices, informatics is one of the hottest fields in health care.

CHANGING LANDSCAPE
Informatics professionals document patients’ health information, including medical history, symptoms, examination and test results, treatments, and other data. They organize and maintain data for clinical databases and registries, record data electronically and ensure the privacy of medical records. At the IT level, they build the software and systems to make all this possible. Pay starts around $32,000 a year.

The growth of informatics as a profession hardly surprises Daniel Nichols, president of Victory Tech Institute in Pittsburgh, a recently opened tech training school whose student body, though small at just a dozen, is more than 80 percent veterans.

While medical practice management is becoming increasingly IT-focused, “you still don’t have a single national standard for how information is maintained, recorded and shared,” said Nichols, a Navy reservist. “At the same time there is the legacy of all this paper data that is still in use.”

Add to this the complexities of data sharing. “Health records are not just maintained in single facilities,” Nichols said. Pharmacists, specialists, primary care doctors and hospitals

As a health records project manager for Tricare, “you are taking care of the service member. You’re not just implementing an IT system,” says retired Lt. Col. Patrick Shannon, a former Army nurse.
all may keep separate sets of documents, "and they don't necessarily talk."

Weighing down upon all these complexities is the deadly serious nature of the business itself. "Entering wrong data is not just an economic issue; it means potentially critical injury for the people you are serving," Nichols said.

Faced with the task of digitizing and merging all past and future data, it's easy to see why informatics ranks high with the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which sees the field growing by 21 percent from 2010 to 2020.

SIMPLIFYING THE PROCESS
Patrick Shannon made the jump to informatics after leaving the Army in 2009 as a lieutenant colonel and longtime nurse. Today he serves as project manager for integrated electronic health records within Tricare.

In purchasing software systems and identifying informatics specialists to run those systems, Shannon sees himself as helping to make medicine easier for everyone. "I like to make things simple when I can," he said. For informatics professionals, "you have various puzzle pieces and you have to find the right fit for the right place for the right person. It's all about the data. Can people get to the data they need to make the best decisions possible?"

As a Tricare official, he sees the informatics profession as a means to ensure that those who serve are properly treated. "You are taking care of the service member. You're not just implementing an IT system," he said. "When you put patient records in the system, and that soldier goes from Afghanistan to the Brooke Army Medical Center, you ultimately are helping all those providers to deliver better care, because you are providing better data for them."

BASE OF SKILLS
Military veterans from a range of backgrounds can find their way into this expanding field.

Medical experience, for instance, will always be a plus. "Nurses like to talk to nurses, lab people like to talk to lab people. They speak the same language, they understand each other," said David Luckey, a software systems manager at Dallas-based CTG Health Solutions. An IT background likewise can give a job candidate an edge.

Informatics professionals may have bachelor's degrees in areas such as medical terminology, anatomy and physiology, or health data requirements and standards. Some employers will accept an associate degree with coursework in these areas, or they may look for a professional certification, which is issued by a range of credible bodies including universities and the American Society of Health Informatics Managers.

As Walker works toward his degree, "the majority of the program is health care knowledge, then maybe 30 percent technology," he said. Anatomy and physiology, medical terminology, practical lab courses, as well as project management and medical office management: It's a lot to take in, but Walker said he is happy to make the effort:

"I see huge potential." — Adam Stone