

# Federal pharmacy may be the best career secret

By Gretel H. Schueller

A job that helps pay for your school, provides paid continuing education, offers international adventure, and makes a difference? Sound almost too good to be true? It's not. Such jobs do exist in the U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS) and the armed services.



“The Navy and any armed service branch have always had the reputation of producing well-disciplined and well-trained individuals,” said Alice Patricio, a fourth-year student at the University of Illinois—Chicago College of Pharmacy and a participant in the Navy scholarship program. “What better way than to be trained by the best? Additionally, it is also a way for me to serve my country and get financial assistance with school.” Patricio chose the Navy scholarship program because of the experience she will gain and the clinical and administrative skills she will develop.

In addition, the Navy, as well as other federal pharmacy settings, provides paid residency programs. “It is common knowledge that doing a pharmacy residency means getting paid half the salary of what a pharmacist in the community setting can potentially make,” said Patricio. “The best thing about this program is that your pay will still be the same. The benefits are great, and there are so many opportunities to network with other pharmacists not only in the armed services, but also with civilian pharmacists.”



## The Air Force

“We have brought a lot of pharmacists in over the last few years,” said COL Ardis J. Meier, consultant to the U.S. Air Force (USAF) surgeon general for pharmacy. The USAF currently has about 240 pharmacy officers. Meier said a captain who was deciding what to do regarding her pharmacy career could not

even think of going back to work in community pharmacy. Meier believes there are a number of reasons for this.

“I think the professional development and the use of professional skills is significantly different than the normal standard pharmacy practice in the civilian sector,” Meier said. “For one thing, we have a ratio of one pharmacist to 4.5 technicians. So our pharmacists spend more time doing professional tasks than they do doing technical tasks. You assume more responsibility. You will actually be in charge of a satellite pharmacy with only a couple years out of school. The military also helps to ensure that you get all your continuing education credits every year. So we try to ensure that everyone is allowed to go to professional meetings to ensure that they stay current.”

The USAF offers two American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP)-accredited residencies in pharmacy practice and several opportunities to receive a graduate or postgraduate degree. USAF pharmacists are also eligible for school loan repayment funds up to \$50,000 per year minus federal taxes and a \$30,000 sign-on bonus.

Through the Health Professions Scholarship Program, the USAF provides assistance to students during the last 1 or 2 years of the PharmD program. The scholarship covers expenses, including tuition, books, fees, equipment, and a student health insurance premium. Students must maintain a 3.0 GPA to qualify for the scholarship and must agree to serve 3 years of active duty. Upon graduation, students enter the USAF as captains. The total annual award package equals approximately \$15,000. The program also gives students the opportunity to gain hands-on experience before they go out into the field.

“It's very competitive. Between 5 and 12 students receive them each year,” said Meier. “It's a great way to go to school. And many of the people who go through these programs are expected to stay in the military for a career.” For those who don't stay in the military, “they are highly marketable in the civilian sector,” added Meier.

## The Army

The Army has more than 150 active duty officers employed as pharmacists, and each year, it hires about 20 new pharmacy officers. With a PharmD degree, new pharmacists come in as captains with a base salary in the \$50,000 range, said COL Mike Heath, pharmacy program manager with the Office of the Army Surgeon General. “But,” he noted, “if you add all the benefits, like housing allowance—tax-free and based on where you live—full medical and dental coverage, life insurance, then I think we're extremely competitive with the medical sector. You really have to look at the total compensation package.”



Other extra benefits include the availability of loan repayment funds of up to \$110,000 for students who have a PharmD and a \$30,000 sign-on bonus. Plus, there are the advanced training opportunities, noted Heath. “Even if you come in with a PharmD, we provide opportunities for continued professional growth and development as both a pharmacist and an officer. Your training does not stop when you enter active duty,” said Heath.

The Army offers paid residencies in pharmacy practice, nuclear pharmacy, and oncology pharmacy; a PhD in areas such as pharmaeconomics and pharmacal epidemiology; and opportunities for training in industry in areas such as pharmacy benefits management and patient safety. For example, a program called Training with Industry is a graduate-level, non-degree-producing program designed to provide training in industrial procedures and practices not available through existing military or advanced school programs. Pharmacy officers selected to participate receive 1 year of training with a PBM, learning the concepts and strategies of managed care and how it is supported by pharmaceutical services.

Of course, said Heath, “you have to compete for these programs. But these are opportunities that are really not available in the civilian sector.” In addition, there are many opportunities for continuing education in pharmacy through a variety of short courses and conferences. Because of these benefits, the career potential in the Army is “extraordinary,” said Heath. “If you are highly motivated, there’s the potential that you could become a general officer in the Army.”

Being an Army pharmacist can also boost your marketability in the civilian sector, Heath added. “The military experience and leadership as a pharmacist in the Army on a resume, I guarantee you, will catapult you ahead of others that you are competing with for other jobs.”

### The Navy

The Navy’s Health Services Collegiate Program (HSCP) is designed so students enlist in the Navy on active duty at full pay and allowances while they complete their degree to become Medical Service Corps officers. A student pay-officer candidate seaman (OCSN) E-3 earns approximately \$26,677 annually and has the opportunity to earn up to \$29,773 annually through promotion. In addition to receiving financial assistance during school, said Patricio, “You also have a job lined up after pharmacy school.”

There are, as with most military opportunities, a few requirements for eligibility: You must be at least 18 and not have reached your 40th birthday upon commissioning. You must also be enrolled in an accredited program and have at least a 3.0 GPA. And lastly, you must be able to complete your degree requirements within 36 months of entering the Navy program. After graduation, you must then fulfill a 3-year commitment as a Navy pharmacist.



Student pharmacists should apply to the Navy’s HSCP during their second year of pharmacy school, as the program is designed to provide financial assistance for the third and fourth years of the PharmD program.

“I would definitely recommend it to the right students,” said Patricio. However, she stressed, the program is not for everyone. It requires dedication and meeting certain criteria. There is, for example, a physical readiness test—a 1.5 mile-run in a specified time, push-ups, and sit-ups that everyone has to pass every 6 months. In addition, the Navy can station you to any naval base where there is a need for pharmacists. “So, one must be flexible enough to accommodate these things,” she noted. “Other than that, the benefits are great, the financial assistance for school is good, and there’s plenty of opportunity to network.”

Patricio continued: “When it comes to advanced training, the Navy encourages its medical professionals to hone and expand their skills through meetings, workshops, and additional schooling.” Plus there are the fringe benefits—the chance to practice around the world, officer rank, free and low-cost travel for you and your family, plus 30 days paid vacation every year. “I have no regrets about joining HSCP,” said Patricio. “The Navy has been good to me. I am looking forward to becoming a Navy pharmacist.”

### U.S. Public Health Service

The other large federal employer of pharmacists, USPHS, has continued to maintain a major presence in both hiring and maintaining career pharmacists. The Commissioned Corps has about 800 pharmacist officers on active duty at both USPHS and non-USPHS service sites. The Indian Health Service (IHS) accounts for almost half of these pharmacists.



Within USPHS, a pharmacist could, for example, be involved in pharmacoepidemiology. Within FDA, pharmacists have long been active in programs to examine drug use, monitor adverse drug events, and provide data for product labeling revisions. Pharmacists within FDA are also active in pharmacoeconomic activities, especially drug use analysis.

The Clinical Center at the National Institutes of Health maintains a full cadre of clinical pharmacist specialists, and a few pharmacists are scattered throughout the various institutes. PHS pharmacy officers also provide health care services within the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) and in the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Take, for example, CDR Paul Huntzinger, chief pharmacist of the USCG Integrated Support Command in Alameda, Calif. He manages pharmacy operations at an ambulatory care clinic that averages about 80 prescriptions a day and provides oversight to 14 other sickbay pharmacies. He has also implemented a tobacco cessation program and created a patient education center.

There are 12 agencies that hire pharmacists as part of the Commissioned Corps: the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality ([www.ahrq.gov](http://www.ahrq.gov)), Agency for Toxic Substances and Dis-

### Federal pharmacy career benefits

Pay and benefits for federal pharmacists are essentially the same **regardless of which agency or branch of the armed services they are in.** They include:

- Full pay and allowances of an officer. This includes tax-free housing and subsistence allowances and periodic length-of-service pay increases.
- Thirty days paid vacation per year, plus 10 federal holidays.
- Complete medical benefits for you and your family, with no payroll deductions or co-pays.
- Life insurance.
- Paid moving and relocation costs.
- Career development and continuing education opportunities.
- Travel opportunities.
- Eligibility for retirement after 20 years, with 50% of base pay at whatever rank you retire.

### Contacts

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USPHS also offers excellent opportunities for financial assistance during school as part of its Commissioned Officer Student Training and Extern Program (COSTEP). Senior COSTEP is available with any of the PHS agencies. However, said CAPT Robert E. Pittman, principal pharmacy consultant for IHS, “for the last 5 years or so, the two agencies that have really used the Senior COSTEP for pharmacy have been the Indian Health Service and the Bureau of Prisons, with the prisons taking the vast majority.”

Students apply to the Senior COSTEP program by December 31 of their junior year and are contacted by the agencies that are interested. Once accepted, the students are paid by their agency during their senior year. “Your job is to finish your education,”

said Pittman. The type of assistance varies slightly with each agency, although the salary averages about \$2,500 a month. “As a general rule, the IHS pays their tuition, books, and salary during their senior year. Some of the other agencies do not pick up tuition.”

Once a COSTEP student graduates with a PharmD, he or she becomes a lieutenant and owes twice the amount of time for which he or she received financial support. During that time, the pharmacist is paid as any other commissioned officer in USPHS would be, meaning the salary increases to about \$3,400 per month. “They receive all the same benefits that any other commissioned officer would receive,” explained Pittman. “The only exception is because they have a commitment to the USPHS already, they are not eligible for the sign-on bonus of \$30,000.”

Another USPHS financial assistance program is the Junior COSTEP, which offers paid employment for periods of 31 to 120 days at any time during a student’s schooling after the first year. The majority of students, however, are hired for summer months, earning about \$2,100 per month, plus travel costs and other benefits.

“We encourage folks to apply. Our whole goal is to bring people out and see what it’s like to be an officer in the Public Health Service,” said Pittman. “For the last few years, the IHS has taken 80% to 90% of the Junior COSTEPs. FDA and NIH have taken a few each; the other agencies have not been using the Junior COSTEP program as much. We get about 120 pharmacy applicants each year.”

IHS offers a unique loan repayment program for full-time employees, providing up to \$20,000 each year. “We are currently the only agency in the Public Health Service that offers loan repayment,” said Pittman. IHS and NIH also offer ASHP-accredited residencies in pharmacy practice, ambulatory care, oncology, drug information, and primary care.

“Many folks find they like the type of practice we do in the USPHS, and specifically in the IHS, because the clinical practice setting in the IHS is much different than the private sector,” said Pittman. “For example, all of our patients are consulted in private consultation rooms. We don’t fill out prescriptions; we fill out the patient’s medical record. So if a patient comes to you, you have the diagnosis, the physical exams, and all the information to decide whether this is the best appropriate care for the patient. So it’s a higher level of use of the pharmacy knowledge and skills. They get much more involved with their patients.”

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