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Mercy's recruiting efforts bringing doctors to town

Health system guarantees a base salary of \$125,000

Andrea Tortora

Managing Editor

After 28 years in practice as a primary care physician in Clermont County, Dr. George Miller found himself working alone after his partner left the practice.

"That's when I realized that when you cut the number of doctors in half, it doesn't cut your overhead in half," Miller said.

So he went to see Joan Manzo, a nurse practitioner at Mercy Hospital Anderson, to see if she could help him find a new partner to join his practice. He went through dozens of applications but had no luck.

The résumés he looked over were for people who either weren't qualified or whose salary requirements were too high.

Then Mercy Healthcare Partners' CEO Tom Urban and Paul Hiltz, vice president for physician services, announced the system's plans to help physicians recruit and offer an income guarantee. Mercy offers this help to doctor groups that work with its hospitals. Mercy does not employ physicians.

And Miller found his partner, Dr. Anthony Kurian, who came to Cincinnati from a position in Lima, Ohio.

"I could not have gotten a partner any other way," Miller said of Mercy's help. "I would have had to take out a loan to pay him, and that would have been prohibitive."

Urban said the hospital system decided to take an active role in physician recruiting after undergoing a series of surveys, studies and retreats with doctors aligned with Mercy's five Greater Cincinnati hospitals. Those studies found that there was a shortage in some practice areas and that doctors here were receiving less pay, but mostly that physicians wanted to work in environments that allowed them to provide good care.

"Physician leadership in advancing the doctor agenda is critical," Urban said. "Administrators can't lead recruitment; doctors need to do it for their practices."

What administrators can do is advertise open positions and help physicians put a positive attitude forward rather than "being our own worst enemy," Hiltz said. Mercy also promised "to keep a steady stream of candidates coming to practices."

Mercy set a goal of bringing 38 doctors to Cincinnati in 2004. It signed on 44, most straight from residencies. And it's already added 24 in 2005. The income guarantee means Mercy puts up money to ensure new doctors earn a base salary of \$125,000, plus benefits, in their first year on the job.

"I think the difference here is the focus," Hiltz said. "This is not an afterthought."

The region's other hospital systems take different approaches to doctor recruitment. The Health Alliance lets each of its hospitals handle their own recruitment needs, said spokeswoman Gail Myers. For example, Christ Hospital conducted a comprehensive survey to evaluate future physician needs based on community need. When a community need is not met, recruitment discussions are held. And the St. Luke Hospitals are working with several specialty practices in the area to assess the need for additional physicians in the community.

The health council's new www.cincinnati.mdjobs.com site also make a difference. A year ago only 33 percent of medical residents were staying in Cincinnati. Why? Because they weren't aware of local positions or weren't offered any, said Lynn Olman, council executive director.

"The supply problem as a whole is getting better," she said.

When Miller interviewed Kurian, he'd found his match. The India-born physician was trained in England and the United States and most recently worked in Lima. He wanted to move to a larger market that was family-friendly.

"I've heard nothing but good things from my patients," Miller said of Kurian. "And it has helped equalize our overhead costs."

Several physicians recruited to the market under this program hit their income guarantee goal within six months, as happened with Dr. John Jacquemin, who joined Freiberg Orthopaedics & Sports Medicine.

"I realized his base salary was going to be a challenge for us to meet," said former Freiberg CEO Chad Wiggins of Jacquemin's recruitment. "So I talked to Mercy, and we created an income guarantee based on the need for spine care west of I-75."

Wiggins also used the program to recruit Dr. Pam Petrosky to Cincinnati. She is the region's third female orthopedist. Petrosky said she wanted to come to Cincinnati because she attended [Miami University](http://www.miami.edu) as an undergraduate and her husband Joseph grew up in the region.

"Money was somewhat of a concern, but I think that things are getting better and moving in the right direction. It's still not the best situation you can be in, and there are definitely other places I could go, but the draw of coming back to family and Cincinnati outweighs my concerns," she said.

Miller said Mercy's recruiting strategy is extremely helpful.

"They recognize that if they want to grow their hospitals they need to have someone to see patients," Miller said. "Without their help I would really have said, 'I can't do this anymore' and would have sought to be bought out by a big group."

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