

# Medical Economics

Smarter Business >> Better Patient Care

## America's best places to practice

We asked our experts to help us spot some hidden gems. Here's what they uncovered.

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### Excerpt:

"If a physician really wants to be in Dallas, we can still find some quality practices for him, says Smith. But if we can get him to expand his search to places within a 45-to 90-minute commute of Dallas—Denton or Gainesville or Dennison, for example—then the quality of the type of practices he'll find goes through the ceiling.

### The Mid-South/South Atlantic

We begin our tour of the best places to practice in a region where practice revenue is among the highest in the nation, according to the latest *Medical Economics* Continuing Survey. Some of the places to consider in this part of the country are:

**Gainesville, GA.** Located on the shores of Lake Lanier, and nestled in the foothills of the North Georgia Mountains, this city of more than 32,000 people is roughly 50 miles northeast of Atlanta. The major health facility in town is a 461-bed, not-for-profit hospital, Northeast Georgia Medical Center and Health System, which employs 422 physicians and consists of a main campus and the Lanier Park Campus, acquired in 2001. This year, HealthGrades, a leading healthcare rating company, gave NGHSs Ronnie Green Heart Center its highest ranking in three cardiac categories: overall care, surgery, and interventions. Nationally, the center placed within the top 5 percent of all hospitals in overall cardiac services and surgery. Gainesville has an excellent healthcare community, a strong economy, good schools, both lake and mountain access, all within an hours drive of Atlanta's main shopping district, says Smith.

There are some drawbacks. Blue Cross Blue Shield of Georgia, a subsidiary of WellPoint Health Networks, controls 68 percent of the combined HMO/PPO market, according to the latest AMA Competition in Health Insurance study. And the AMA's medical liability study still lists Georgia among the states that bear watching. On this last point, though, Smith says: The Gainesville patient is more likely to have a personal relationship with her physician, and, therefore, is far less likely to be engaged in litigation if something goes wrong.'

**Waynesville, Clyde, and Hendersonville, NC.** The largest and best-known city in this northwestern corner of the state is Asheville, population 72,000. Situated in the French Broad River valley, amid the Blue Ridge and Great Smoky Mountains, this yuppie magnet area, as one consultant called it, has a thriving healthcare community—perhaps too thriving for the physician looking for new opportunities. It wasn't too long ago that Asheville was considered by many the next city, the one you went to as an alternative to Raleigh-Durham, Winston-Salem, or even Atlanta, Smith says. But, at this point, established primary care and specialty groups pretty much control it," making it difficult for doctors starting new practices or looking for jobs at an attractive salary.

Enter Waynesville, population around 10,000, and the towns of Clyde and Hendersonville. According to Smith, these are now the next cities, where, as he says, doctors willing to go a little beyond Asheville 'can add between 10 to 30 percent to their base incomes. The 125-bed Haywood Regional Medical Center, in Clyde, serves both that city and Waynesville, approximately 10 miles away. Other hospitals in the general area are Harris Regional Hospital, in Sylva, and Cherokee Indian Hospital, in Cherokee. In Hendersonville, a picturesque city of 12,000, Pardee Hospital, a 222-bed acute care facility, also serves the surrounding towns in Henderson County, population 97,000. According to the AMA, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina is the major health plan in the Asheville area, with 46 percent of the combined HMO/PPO market.

All these are really nice towns," says Smith, "and, as a doctor practicing in any of them, you have the added bonus of living in a place where people from the larger cities go to on the weekends.