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What is a good field to go into in New Mexico? One answer is health care, as it has been and continues to be a vital industry in our state’s economy. An estimated 15 percent of total employment is in health care, and it is usually the second largest sector next to government. Even in these difficult economic times, many of the top jobs listed as recession-proof jobs in New Mexico are health care-related, and the industry as a whole has grown by 57,000 jobs since 1990.

Why has health care been such a large part of our economy? The first answer is population, and it is simply more people equals more health care needs. New Mexico’s population has continued to grow at high rates, much like our southwestern neighbors. Since 1990, our population has increased 31 percent, and it is predicted that the 2010 Census results will put New Mexico well above the 2 million mark.

Also, it is the characteristics of our population that result in higher health care demands. Twenty-nine percent of the state population is younger than 20 years old and 13 percent is over the age of 65. Children and older residents are often the highest health care consumers. The demands on our state will increase as the “baby boomers” age, and approximately a quarter of our population fall into this group, according to Census data.

The enrollment rates of government-sponsored health plans, including Medicaid and Medicare, contribute to the large health care sector in New Mexico. The participation in these plans increases the need for health care services across the state, and during economic hardship, these numbers could dramatically increase.

The 2006-2016 projections include health care and social assistance sector employment increasing to 127,109 jobs for a total change of 25 percent. The growth in health care has been strong and constant, and the industry sector continues to provide thousands of jobs in New Mexico. The key will be monitoring and analyzing labor market information to ensure that our future workforce can meet the demands of this growing field.