

The face of Canadian physicians

There has been much talk in recent years about the changing face of the Canadian physician workforce and what this change means for the future of healthcare.

Feminization

The CMA masterfile data shows a trend towards increasing numbers of female physicians entering the workforce. In 1999, women made up 28% of the physician population while 10 years later they comprise 34%. This trend can be expected to continue given that for physicians younger than 35 years, the percentage of female physicians has exceeded male physicians since 2002 and now stands at 56%.

A 50-50 gender split has virtually already been attained, irrespective of age, in certain specialties such as family medicine (48% female),¹ paediatrics (49% female) as well as geriatric medicine (51% female).

According to the 2007 National Physician Survey (NPS), on average female physicians work fewer hours per week, excluding on-call, than their male colleagues (47 hours compared to 54 hours); however, when comparing female and male physicians who do not have children or do not have any children younger than 18 years, the hours of work tend to even out (50 hours for female physicians and 51 hours for male).

Age

Amid concerns that as the Canadian population ages, demands on the healthcare services may increase, the average age of physicians is also increasing. Ten years ago, the average age was 48 (50 for men, and 43 for women), while today, in 2009, the average age of a physician is 51 (53 and 47 for men and women respectively). Thirteen percent of the current physician workforce is 65 years or older, and over a third (37%) of Canadian physicians are over the age of 55 compared to 28% in 1999.

International Medical Graduates

In addition to Canadian graduates, international medical graduates (IMGs) have traditionally contributed significantly to the physician pool. The percentage of IMGs in Canada has remained relatively constant over the past 10 years, ranging from 23% to 25%.

Though approximately 23% of physicians currently practicing in Canada graduated from medical school in another country, IMGs constitute a more significant proportion of the physician population in a number of provinces such as Saskatchewan and Newfoundland and Labrador, where 54% and 40% respectively of the physician workforce is made up of IMGs.

Tara S. Chauhan, CMA Canadian Collaborative Centre for Physician Resources.

¹ Family Medicine refers to the certified specialty of Family Medicine and does not include General practitioners.