



Media Release Embargoed until March 18, 2008 – 5:00 a.m. EST

Access to health care: Survey finds Canada is not a level playing field

(March 18, 2008, Ottawa, ON) – A national survey of physicians reveals doctors across Canada are concerned about inadequate access to health care services for their patients, and the situation in some provinces and territories is worse than in others.

The National Physician Survey (NPS) is Canada's largest census survey of physicians and physicians-in-training. The survey is conducted jointly by the Canadian Medical Association, The College of Family Physicians of Canada, and The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada. Today's release provides the regional detail from the original release of national results in January. It updates the results found in the 2004 survey with an in-depth look at how and where physicians in each province and territory work, and the issues they face in providing care to their patients.

"The 2007 NPS confirms that the dire shortage of family physicians and certain other specialists is a significant and ongoing issue for patients in all provinces and territories," states CMA President, Dr. Brian Day. "Some areas are worse off than others. Health workforce planning must be addressed to improve access to health care for patients no matter where they live."

Looking for a family physician? Saskatchewan ranked the highest for the percentage of family physicians accepting new patients (45%). PEI ranked the lowest, with 2% of family physicians accepting new patients.

"Federal funding and a commitment to reducing wait times has helped improve access to care in specified areas, but the regional NPS outcomes reflect significant variations in access to specialty care," says Dr. Louise Samson, President, The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada. "The NPS results confirm that patients' access to psychiatrists, orthopedic surgeons, ophthalmologists and advanced diagnostic services remain a challenge in most provinces and territories. In fact, ratings for access to orthopedic surgeons deteriorated in eight provinces since 2004. We must commit the additional resources needed to further improve access to these and other important services."

The percentage of physicians ranking access as fair to poor differs among the provinces and territories:

- 71% of family physicians ranked access to psychiatrists in Ontario fair to poor compared to 45% of family physicians in Saskatchewan.
- 61% of family physicians in Quebec ranked access to orthopedic surgeons fair to poor compared to 26% in Prince Edward Island.
- 72% of family physicians in Prince Edward Island ranked access to ophthalmologists fair to poor compared to 25% in Saskatchewan.
- 57% of physicians in British Columbia and Saskatchewan ranked access to diagnostic services (e.g. CTs and MRIs) fair to poor compared to 34% in New Brunswick.

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Several significant trends in physician practice patterns are highlighted in the NPS results:

- Based on the 6% who plan to retire, we can expect upwards of 4,000 physicians leaving clinical practice over the next two years. Intentions to retire are consistent province to province.
- Gaps are being increasingly filled by a female physician cohort. Studies have shown this to have positive impacts on doctor-patient relationships, service organization, and access to services, while having significant implications for future resource planning. Currently, 33% of all family physicians under the age of 35 are women in Prince Edward Island, and this percentage rises to 72% in Quebec.
- In 2004, 26% of physicians planned to reduce their hours. The 2007 NPS confirmed that in fact 27% of physicians had reduced their hours over the last two years. Now, 35% of physicians plan to reduce their weekly work hours over the next two years - from 28% of family physicians in Manitoba to 37% of family physicians in Quebec and the Territories; and from 30% of other specialists in Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia to 40% in Quebec.

“The NPS partner organizations challenge all levels of government and health authorities across the country to develop a pan-Canadian strategy that will effectively address the urgent issues identified in the NPS results that further threaten Canada’s health system,” says Dr. Ruth Wilson, President, The College of Family Physicians of Canada. “We need to work together to enhance the education, training, recruitment and retention of physicians to ensure a sustainable workforce that can meet the health care needs of Canadians in all provinces and territories.”

For a more detailed summary highlighting the 2007 provincial/territorial results, see backgrounder and tabular results for all survey questions, at www.nationalphysiciansurvey.ca. More NPS research will be released in April 2008 to share a specialist physician analysis as well as medical student and resident results.

The NPS is funded through contributions from the Canadian Medical Association, The College of Family Physicians of Canada, The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, the Canadian Institute for Health Information, and Health Canada.

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To request interviews, please contact:

Cristiane Doherty

Delta Media
1-888-473-3582
Cell (613) 799-9277
cristiane@deltamedia.ca

Bernard Gauthier

Delta Media
1-888-473-3582
bernard@deltamedia.ca

Jayne Johnston

The College of Family Physicians of Canada
1-800-387-6197 ext. 303 / (905) 629-0900 ext. 303
jjohnston@cfpc.ca

Cecily Wallace

The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada
1-800-668-3740 ext. 463 / (613) 730-6277 ext. 463 / Cell (613) 668-6465
cwallace@rcpsc.edu

Lucie Boileau

Canadian Medical Association
1-800-663-7336 ext. 1266 / (613) 731-8610 ext. 1266
Lucie.Boileau@cma.ca