

Regional data from largest-ever survey of doctors in Canada show tough times ahead

OTTAWA- February 15, 2005 – Regional data from the largest-ever survey of Canada's physician population provides stark warnings in every province and territory about coming trends concerning the nation's supply of physicians.

The College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC), the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) and The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada (RCPSC) base this conclusion on the release today of the second phase of the National Physician Survey (NPS). The NPS involved over 21,000 physicians, from all disciplines. This is the first time the three national organizations have come together to conduct this research.

The national-level NPS data released last fall showed that a tight physician supply is negatively impacting access to care and wait times for Canadians. This finding will be exacerbated as about 10% of pathologists, internal medicine specialists, general surgeons and otolaryngologists plan to retire in the next 2 years. Highlights of the regional data contain other dire projections such as the fact that some 10% of physicians in Newfoundland and Labrador are planning to leave the province in the next two years.

"Our governments have committed to universal access to care, a principle enshrined in the Canada Health Act, but we are seeing signs that this very principle is being challenged by changes in physician resources," said Dr. Alain Pavilanis, President of the CFPC. "This second release of NPS data reveals significant jurisdictional differences concerning access to care for Canadians, impacted by regional variations in physician supply and practice patterns."

Regional data from the NPS also identified the fact that many physicians consider on call activities to be a particularly stressful part of being a physician. Not surprisingly, higher levels of on call activity were reported by physicians in smaller jurisdictions compared to those in larger regions. In less populated jurisdictions close to 20% of physicians reported being on call more than 240 hours per month, or more than one night in three.

"The health care system has for too long relied upon physicians to make up for its shortfalls," said Dr. Stewart Hamilton, President of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada. "Physicians have continued to provide for their patients, despite situations where adequate resources are not available; where urgent, but non-emergent, care is often provided in off hours and where timely access to services happens only after the physician has navigated bureaucratic barriers. The implicit contract between a physician and his/her hospital/region has broken down."

The reality that both new physicians and those nearing the end of their careers are choosing to work differently is an important consideration that is consistent across the country. Nationally, 16% of doctors have reduced their weekly work hours in the past two years and over a quarter plan to do so in the next two years. These numbers are quite consistent across the country with Quebec leading the way with almost a third planning to reduce their future work week.

Physicians also reported difficulties in securing access to hospital care, long-term beds and advanced diagnostic services for their patients. Regional differences in access to resources for health care services affect the timelines and consistency of standards of care being delivered to patients within some jurisdictions of Canada. This may impact the quality of care that Canadians can expect to receive from region to region.

In fact, the NPS data shows over half of all physicians in BC (55%) rated access to hospital care for elective procedures as fair or poor compared to 34% in Quebec and Newfoundland and Labrador. Access to long-term beds was rated fair or poor by well over 60% of physicians in PEI, NS and BC, compared to under half in Quebec and Manitoba. Access to advanced diagnostic services seemed to be a problem in NL and Saskatchewan where over two thirds rated access as being either fair or poor, compared to 37% in NB. Access to drugs and medical appliances received the highest rating in Quebec with only 13% rating access as either fair or poor, compared to over 30% in NL and PEI.

“Physicians can no longer apologize for and work harder to overcome the shortcomings of the health care system to ensure our patients get the care they need,” said Dr. Albert Schumacher, President of the CMA. “Governments must understand that the system’s greatest assets; health care professionals, are fed up with working harder and harder to fill in the gaps.”

A Backgrounder and Statistics Tables are available at www.nps-snm.ca .

The National Physician Survey was made possible through financial contributions by the College of Family Physicians of Canada, the Canadian Medical Association, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, the Canadian Institute for Health Information, and Health Canada. The NPS is a self-reported survey, sent to all licensed physicians in Canada. It was sent out by mail and email. In total, 21,296 physicians replied to the survey. The results are considered accurate to within +/- 0.7 per cent, 19 times out of 20 and can be found at www.nps-snm.ca .

The Canadian Medical Association is the national voice of physicians in Canada. Representing 59,000 physicians across the country, the CMA mission is to serve and unite the physicians of Canada and be the national advocate, in partnership with the people of Canada for the highest standards of health and health care.

The College of Family Physicians of Canada is the voice of family medicine in Canada. Representing 17,000 members across the country, it is the professional organization responsible for establishing standards for the training, certification, and lifelong education of family physicians and for advocating on behalf of family medicine, family physicians and their patients. The CFPC accredits postgraduate family medicine training in Canada’s 16 medical schools.

The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada (RCPSC) is a national, non-profit organization of 38, 000 medical specialists in 92 countries dedicated to ensuring the highest standards and quality of health care. The RCPSC is the authoritative voice of specialty medicine in Canada.

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