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## **Aging population and chronic diseases causing a strain on the health system: National Physician Survey**

(June 11, 2008, Ottawa, ON) – New data released today from the 2007 National Physician Survey (NPS) reveals that Canadian physicians are experiencing a health system under stress with patients who have complex health needs, emergency departments that are overloaded, and insufficient physician numbers due to the shortfall of broad-based generalists who are so essential for the care of older populations with multiple chronic diseases. All of this points to the need for urgent action.

According to the NPS survey, 80 percent of physicians overall identified that the growing needs of chronic patient care places the most demand on their time. They are seeing more and more Canadians who are suffering from diabetes, cancer, heart disease and mental health issues:

- 86% of family physicians (FPs) provide care for patients with chronic mental illnesses
- 88% of FPs care for patients with heart disease and patients with hypertension
- 76% of medical oncologists identify system funding and 71% identify the lack of availability of personnel as major barriers to treating cancer patients
- 50% of endocrinologists rated access to FPs for their patients as poor, compared to 29% overall for other specialists.

The system, unfortunately, is not adequately equipped to provide timely care for these patients.

“Canada needs a coordinated, pan-Canadian approach to educate, train, recruit and retain a sufficient number of physicians to meet the needs of an aging population with multiple health problems,” explained Dr. Louise Samson, President of The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada (RCPSC). “This approach should include support for an infrastructure charged with coordinating the ongoing study, monitoring and public reporting of the health human resource needs across the country.”

### **Emergency departments becoming overloaded**

The needs of patients for urgent care exceed the capacity of the system to respond in a timely way. While 65 percent of family physicians can see a patient in urgent need of care within one day, only 37 percent of all other specialists can respond in that timeframe. “Limited access to family physicians and other specialist physicians is putting undue pressure on overloaded emergency departments,” noted Dr. Ruth Wilson, President of The College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC). “The emergency department has become the back door to our health system which is not appropriate, efficient or cost effective.” With 45% of RCPSC-certified and 33% of CFPC-certified emergency medicine physicians reporting in the NPS 2007 that they plan to reduce their hours in the next two years, the situation has reached a critical point that must find sustainable solutions.

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Governments, medical schools and professional medical organizations must collaborate and develop new ways to improve continuity of care for patients by forging links across the health care system. Greater systemic cooperation is needed to address the new, emerging and growing demands of patient care in today's health environment.

Generalist specialists like family physicians, internists, pediatricians and general surgeons are an integral part of the health system in this country. However, these specialties are facing resource shortages and the NPS survey indicates large numbers plan to retire within the next two years.

"The broad-based care that generalists provide is especially crucial in smaller communities," stated Canadian Medical Association President, Dr. Brian Day. "These physicians are already facing difficult conditions, with many 55 years or older, and many not only reducing their work hours but also planning to retire in the near future." Forty-nine percent of internists, 38% of general surgeons, 39% of pediatricians<sup>1</sup> and 33% of family physicians are 55 or older. Forty-one percent of internists, 40% of general surgeons, 33% of pediatricians, and 34% of family physicians plan to reduce their hours in the next two years.

The NPS has been made possible through the financial contributions of 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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For a much more concentrated look at highly specialized care provided by family physicians and other specialists in Canada, please see the summary report on the NPS website, [www.nationalphysiciansurvey.ca](http://www.nationalphysiciansurvey.ca). In addition, if you visit the NPS website, you will find tabular results for every survey question for every specialty.

**To request interviews, please contact:**

*(Aussi disponible en français)*

<i>Cristiane Doherty</i>	<i>Bernard Gauthier</i>
Delta Media	Delta Media
1-888-473-3582	1-888-473-3582
Cell. 613-799-9277	<a href="mailto:bernard@deltamedia.ca">bernard@deltamedia.ca</a>
<a href="mailto:cristiane@deltamedia.ca">cristiane@deltamedia.ca</a>	

*Jayne Johnston*  
The College of Family Physicians of Canada  
1-800-387-6197 ext. 303/ (905) 629-0900 ext. 303  
[jjohnston@cfpc.ca](mailto:jjohnston@cfpc.ca)

*Cecily Wallace*  
The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada  
1-800-668-3740 ext. 180 / (613) 260-4180 ext. 180 / Cell (613) 286-7328  
[cwallace@rcpsc.edu](mailto:cwallace@rcpsc.edu)

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

<sup>1</sup> 'Pediatrics' refers only to general pediatrics and the special programs of developmental pediatrics and neonatal and perinatal medicine.