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A CONCENTRATED FOCUS ON MEDICAL SERVICES: A Summary Report of the 2007 National Physician Survey (NPS)

The purpose of this release is to provide a focused look at the National Physician Survey (NPS) findings, with respect to specialized care.

For details on particular specialties, visit the NPS website and access tabular results for every survey question for every specialty:

www.nationalphysiciansurvey.ca.

SERVING AN AGING POPULATION AND THE INCREASING COMPLEXITY OF PATIENT NEEDS

The health system's capacity to cope with the increasing burden of chronic disease is in jeopardy given the aging population and the increasing complexity of patient needs.

Mental Health and Addictions

- 86 percent of family physicians (FPs) provide care for patients with chronic mental illnesses.
- 64 percent of FPs rated access to psychiatrists for their patients as being fair or poor:
 - Only 19.4 percent of psychiatrists can see an urgent case within one day.
 - 32 percent of psychiatrists reported having reduced their work hours in the past two years and 39 percent plan to reduce their hours in the next two years.
- In addition, 50 percent of FPs rated access to mental health counselors as fair to poor, 50 percent rated access to psychosocial support services (e.g. psychologists and social workers) as fair to poor, and 46 percent rated access to addiction counselors as fair to poor.
- Among other specialists, 32% rated access to mental health counselors as fair to poor, 35% rated access to psychosocial support services as fair to poor, and 24% rated access to addiction counselors as fair or poor.

Heart Disease

- 88 percent of FPs care for patients with heart disease and patients with hypertension.
- There is some good news to report on the current access to cardiac care specialists:
 - 72 percent of FPs and 57 percent of other specialists said that access to cardiac care services is excellent, very good or good.
 - 84 percent of cardiologists believe that access to cardiac services is either excellent, very good, or good.
 - 84 percent of cardiac surgeons and 76% of cardiologists said their practice is open to all new patients.

However, at the same time:

- Heart specialists such as cardiologists and cardiac surgeons reported working longer hours than the average reported by other specialists.

- Patient access to heart specialists may well be reduced in the near future with a notable percentage of heart specialists nearing retirement age and planning to reduce their hours.

Cancer

- Seventy percent of FPs and 54 percent of other specialists indicated that access to cancer care services are excellent, very good or good.
- Additionally, 47 percent of radiation oncologists reported that they can see an urgent case within a day and another 48 percent can see urgent referrals within a week. Also, 82% of radiation oncologists and 81% of medical oncologists said their practice is completely open to new patients.
- Physicians who specialize in treating cancer, such as oncologists, radiation oncologists and others reported barriers to care:
 - 76 percent of medical oncologists identified system funding and 71 percent identified the lack of availability of personnel as major impediments to their delivery of care.
 - Similarly, anesthesiologists (90 percent of whom reported caring for cancer patients) rated funding and lack of availability of personnel highly as barriers to care (74 percent and 71 percent respectively).
- Medical oncologists also reported working a higher number of hours than specialists overall, with many planning to reduce their hours.

Diabetes

- The care of diabetic patients is shared by physicians in many fields:
 - 89 percent of FPs, 89 percent of nephrologists, 88 percent of geriatricians, and 79 percent of general internists care for patients with diabetes.
 - As would be expected of their specialty, 93 percent of endocrinologists provide care for patients with diabetes.
- However, among endocrinologists:
 - Over one quarter (26%) said their practice is partially closed to new patients.
 - Furthermore, while continuity of care for diabetic patients is key to good management, 50 percent of endocrinologists rated access to FPs for their patients as poor (compared to 29 percent overall for other specialists).

PUSH FOR ACCESS IS OVERLOADING EMERGENCY DEPARTMENTS

The needs of patients for urgent care combined with a desire for better access to physicians are exceeding the capacity of the system to respond in a timely way, putting undue pressure on already overburdened emergency departments.

- Even among Canadians with a family physician, 2/3 of their FPs (65%) reported they can see a patient with an urgent problem within one day.
- Only 37 percent of all other specialists can see patients in urgent need of care within one day. Access to some specialties is especially challenging, e.g. only 14% of psychiatrists, 19% of gastroenterologists, and 27% of orthopedic surgeons (a wait time priority area), can see urgent cases within a day.
 - It is encouraging to note that in ophthalmology, another wait time priority area for governments, 72 percent of specialists can see patients within one day if the situation is urgent.
- The pressure of overburdened emergency departments is experienced by our emergency physicians:

- Special training in Emergency medicine is certified by the College of Family physicians of Canada (CFPC) (for FPs) or by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada (RCPSC) (for other specialists).
- RCPSC (45%) and CFPC-certified emergency medicine physicians (33%) plan to reduce their hours in the coming two years. They cite lack of availability of personnel and lack of appropriate facilities for complex patients as major impediments to providing care for their patients.

INABILITY TO SUSTAIN LONG WORK HOURS AND DELIVER QUALITY CARE

Physicians are dedicated to the care of their patients; however they cannot sustain working the long hours necessary to meet all the complex needs of the population.

- In addition to their on-call duties, FPs reported working 50 hours per week on average, and other specialists reported working 54 hours per week with cardiac surgeons putting in 65 hours per week and urologists putting in 61 hours weekly.
- Many family physicians and other specialists indicated their intent to cut back on their work hours. Twenty-six percent of other specialists reported having reduced their work hours in the last two years with another 36 percent planning to do so in the next two years. Among FPs, 28 percent reduced their work hours in the last two years and 34 percent plan to reduce hours in the next two years.
- Diagnostic specialties (radiology, pathology) are essential, however:
 - 56 percent of FPs and 40 percent of other specialists rated access to advanced diagnostic services as fair to poor.
 - Only 15 percent of anatomical pathologists, who look at biopsies among other things, can attend to an urgent case in one day.

GENERALISTS ARE VITAL TO THE HEALTH SYSTEM

Generalist specialists such as family physicians, internists, pediatricians and general surgeons are crucial to providing broad-based care to Canadians in all parts of the country, especially rural/remote communities.¹ The challenges faced in the generalist fields are likely to continue given the growing trend among physicians to focus their practices and sub-specialize, as well as the increasing number of physicians-in-training choosing highly specialized careers, as revealed in the student/resident component of the 2007 NPS. We need to change the way physicians work together, and be open to how the system can support these practice preferences while still providing the public with the type of care that they need, and that physicians really want to deliver.

- **Internal medicine**
 - 41 percent of internal medicine specialists said they plan to reduce their work hours over the next two years and 9 percent plan to retire from clinical practice.
 - 49 percent of general internists are 55 or older.
- **General surgery**
 - 40 percent of general surgeons plan to reduce their hours in the next 2 years along with 12 percent who plan to retire from clinical practice.

¹ The future of rural surgical care in Canada: a time for action
Canadian Journal of Surgery, Vol. 45, No. 2, April 2002

- 38 percent of general surgeons are 55 or older.
- **Pediatrics²**
 - 39 percent of pediatricians are 55 or older
 - The percentage of pediatricians saying their practice is partially closed to new patients (28%) is almost double the average for other specialists (15%) who indicated partially closed practices.
 - 33 percent of pediatricians plan to reduce their weekly work hours in the next two years and nearly 7 percent plan to retire from clinical practice.
- **Family medicine**
 - 34 percent of family physicians plan to reduce their hours in the next two years, and 6 percent plan to retire from clinical practice in the next two years.
 - 33 percent of family physicians are 55 or older.

HEALTH HUMAN RESOURCE PLANNERS MUST LISTEN TO THESE FINDINGS

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 increasingly complex health problems.

- 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.
- Governments, medical schools and professional medical organizations need to work together to ensure adequate policies are in place for a healthy and sustainable medical profession.
- International medical graduates will continue to make a valued contribution to the physician workforce in Canada, but are not the only solution to the shortages.
- Governments, medical schools and professional medical organizations must continue to collaborate and develop new ways to improve continuity of care for patients by forging links across the health care system. Greater systemic collaboration is needed to address the new, emerging and growing demands of caring for patients in today's health care environment.

NPS BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

The National Physician Survey (NPS) is a major ongoing research project that gathers the opinions of physicians, 2nd year residents and medical students from across the country. It is the largest census survey of its kind and is an important barometer of where the country's present and future doctors are on a wide range of critical issues.

- The College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC), The Canadian Medical Association (CMA) and The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada (RCPSC) work collaboratively to manage this important research. The NPS is made possible through the financial contributions of the CMA, CFPC, RCPSC, the Canadian Institute for Health

² 'Pediatrics' refers only to general pediatrics and the special programs of developmental pediatrics and neonatal and perinatal medicine.

Information (CIHI) and Health Canada. The NPS has received cash and in-kind contributions for a total budget of \$1.2 Million over 3 years (2007-2009).

- On June 11, 2008 the fourth phase of the NPS results is being released. This includes a more concentrated look at the different medical disciplines in Canada. Previous releases have focused on regional information and on the perspectives of medical students and residents. 2007 Survey results expand and build on the 2004 Survey.
- The 2007 edition of the NPS was carried out as a self-reported survey sent to all licensed physicians in Canada. NPS respondents completed the survey either on paper or electronically. A change in the methodology from NPS 2004, the NPS 2007 consisted of a shorter core questionnaire as well as a longer detailed questionnaire with two versions developed specifically for family physicians and general practitioners (FPs), and another for all other medical specialists.
- Surveys and reminders were mailed and emailed using the NPS Masterfile contact list. The NPS Masterfile was populated with information from the CMA Membership System, the CFPC membership database, and the RCPSC membership database.
- The NPS 2007 questions evolved from questions used on the NPS 2004. A working group approach was taken that included representatives from the CFPC, CMA, RCPSC, CIHI, and other affiliated societies to review and refine questions asked in the NPS 2004.
- Of the 60,811 physicians who were eligible to complete the NPS 2007, 19,239 responded for a rate of 32%. Survey respondents included 10,270 family physicians and 8,969 other specialists.

This is the fourth and final official collaborative media release of the 2007 NPS results planned at this time. Medical organizations, health care system planners, health care stakeholder organizations, governments, media, researchers, academics, individual physicians, residents and students are encouraged to visit the NPS website www.nationalphysicianssurvey.ca and to use the 2004 and 2007 survey findings in their own work. Specific data not released on the NPS website (National, Provincial/Territorial, Medical students, Medical residents, Individual specialties), can be requested by filling out an online Results Request Form on the NPS website. Look for the next survey in 2010!

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