

Changing physician population pressuring healthcare system

*Largest-ever poll of doctors in country shows need for action
on physician supply more urgent than ever*

OTTAWA- October 27, 2004--*Updated November 29, 2004* — A major survey of Canada's physician population has identified a number of shifts that will lead to an alarming state in physician supply and access to care unless adequate policies are put in place by all levels of government, according to three of the country's largest medical organizations.

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 first 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 NPS shows that a tight physician supply is negatively impacting access to care and wait times for Canadians. The survey found that 60 per cent of family physicians are either limiting the number of new patients they see or are not taking new patients at all. This isn't just for well-established practices, but also true of younger family physicians. Almost half of family physicians under the age of 35 report their practices are either partially or completely closed to new patients.

"This survey shows clearly how access to care is being limited by the tight physician supply we are experiencing in Canada," said Dr. Robert Wedel, President of the CFPC. "Family doctors are the preferred first point of contact for Canadians in the health-care system. They often help them navigate an increasingly complex system. The shortage of family doctors is limiting access to the health-care system at the front door."

The situation is similar among specialists, even though the factors may be different (including not only physician supply, but other elements such as operating room time and hospital staff availability). More than a quarter (27%) of specialists said they could not see non-urgent cases referred to them in less than three months or did not accept referrals at all (excludes those who did not answer the question or for whom referrals are not applicable). (Revised November 19, 2004)

The NPS identified two other significant shifts in the physician population that are changing the face of medicine in the country. First, a large number of physicians are reaching retirement. If the survey data is translated to the physician population as a whole, as many as 3,800 doctors plan to retire entirely in the next two years alone. This is more than double the current rate of retirement. Secondly, women are now dominating entry into the field, making up over half of all new physicians coming out of medical school. On average, female physicians work about seven fewer hours a week than their male colleagues. The primary reason women are working fewer hours is they tend to have additional family responsibilities.

Overall, physicians reported working an average of 51 hours per week. Including on-call hours, physicians typically have a workload of between 70 and 80 hours per week. For hundreds of physicians in the country, their workload goes well beyond that to include around-the-clock coverage, seven days a week.

The reality is that both physicians nearing the end of their careers and physicians entering the profession are choosing to manage their careers in new ways. Across the spectrum of the physician population, the research shows reduced workloads over the next couple of years are a priority for many. Based on the survey, over 15,000 or 26 per cent of physicians in the country over the next two years plan to reduce the number of hours they work. Only 4 per cent plan to increase the hours they work.

“We strongly believe that physicians and surgeons in Canada must be able to strike a proper balance between their professional and personal responsibilities,” said Dr. Stewart Hamilton, President of the Royal College. “The commitment of physicians and other health professionals through health care restructuring and funding reductions has led to a tenuous situation. As the study of workplace fatigue finds disturbing evidence of fatigue’s impact on physician health, serious questions are also raised with respect to fatigue’s impact on the quality and safety of patient care.”

A number of the shifts identified in the NPS are producing profound changes for the health-care system that will need to be tackled by government decision makers. “Only when physician shortages are meaningfully addressed will governments be able to offer Canadians the type of health-care system they need,” said Dr. Albert Schumacher, President of the CMA. “It will be critical for governments to recognize both the changing make-up of the physician workforce and new approaches to professional life within it and develop policies accordingly. Failing to do so will only make the problem more acute.”

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 58,000 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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