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New doctors' deal won't cure woes quickly

Demand for family medicine is soaring

Not enough students attracted to the field

The new doctors' deal with the Ontario government, accepted last month, is "making an effort" to address the crisis in family medicine, but doesn't go far enough to have a significant impact, says Dr. Gordon Guyatt, of the Medical Reform Group.

Increasing funding for family doctors is positive, but there must more incentives to move them toward "multi-disciplinary integrated care" — or team networks where family doctors have supports from nurse practitioners, dietitians, social workers, mental health experts and other preventive health care professionals, he says.

The Ontario College of Family Physicians says the deal takes significant steps to increase family doctors' pay and should help attract more people to family practice. Spokesperson Dr. Val Rachlis says the new deal is a good start but won't fix the problem.

"It is going to be a long process," he says, before attempts to revamp primary care or increase the number of doctors has any effect. However, he says the basic principles of the initial agreement that tried to address the shortage are still solid in the latest deal.

Yesterday, Health Minister George Smitherman acknowledged the crisis.

The family doctor shortage means "a million people ... aren't getting the health care they need," he told a gathering at the Rotman School of Management. Though the government is taking steps to address the problem he doesn't know when it will be fixed. Increased spots for foreign-trained doctors and new spots for family medicine training will help create 337 more family doctors by 2008, he said. And the deal makes family practice more attractive, he added.

It's unclear just how many family doctors are needed in Ontario, but many say the number of patients without them will grow to at least 1.3 million within the next two to five years.

Guyatt says there are no central registries to track how many or what types of patients must be served — despite a report by the college last November stressing the importance of getting an accurate picture of the need. Ontario has 9,730 family doctors in active practice — either on salary, billing OHIP or a combination of both, a physician database says.

And, depending on the source, the province is short anywhere from 570 to 1,000 family doctors.

Doctors are not attracted to family medicine due to the low pay, experts say. The most recent data show the average payment per full-time family doctors was \$183,448, but \$225,357 for specialists and \$322,459 for surgical specialists. This is before overhead, staffing, supply costs and other expenses

which consume up to 50 per cent of the fees family doctors get — leaving an average pay of \$90,000 before taxes.

All this makes it hard to get new students to take family medicine, especially considering rising tuition, doctors groups say. Since 1997, medical school tuition soared — with the University of Toronto's medical school charging about \$16,000 a year — until Queen's Park froze fees a year ago.

But demand for family medicine keeps growing. Older patients have more complex problems like diabetes, cardiac problems and chronic pain. More stay at home and out of hospital, but with insufficient home care, family doctors must play a bigger role. Family doctors are taking up the slack because there are too few mental health resources, experts say.

Bill Wilkerson, a lobbyist for mental health in the workplace, says depression, which is increasing at a staggering rate in many age groups, sends most people to the family doctor first.

As services such as hearing tests, eye exams, physiotherapy and chiropractic care have been delisted from OHIP in varying degrees, patients go to family doctors to fill the void.

The shift to more outpatient surgery from in-hospital care also raises the demand for the family doctor, experts say.

For many of these reasons, the Coalition of Family Physicians of Ontario did not endorse the recent deal.

Its president, Dr. Douglas Mark, says the new agreement fails to "encourage retention and recruitment of family physicians, (and) hasn't adequately addressed the issue of relativity and thus doesn't make Ontario competitive enough to save family practice."

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