

Addressing the Doctor Shortage

(Submitted by Burlington Chamber of Commerce and Sault Ste. Marie Chamber of Commerce)

Issue:

Since the Sault Ste. Marie resolution in March 2002, news headlines continue to report on the national shortage of primary care and physician specialists. While new areas like Burlington have been included in the increasing number of centers in Ontario that have been designated as under-serviced areas, other centres in Ontario, like Sault Ste. Marie, continue to struggle to attract doctors into their communities, putting an increasing pressure on the demand for physician services.

At the time of the Sault Ste. Marie resolution a task force of doctors appointed by the country's medical associations and medical schools stated, "Canada needs between 540 and 600 additional doctors annually just to cope with our rising population and our aging Canadian population which requires more health care as increasing numbers of physicians retire." In the last two years the issue of doctor shortages has continued to make headlines.

Background:

There are currently two sources for new physicians in our communities; assessment and licensing of foreign-trained physicians, and graduates from the provinces five medical schools. Together, these sources are not providing an adequate supply of physicians for current and future needs in Ontario.

In March 2002, the Sault Ste. Marie resolution cited a shortage of young doctors because of decreased medical school enrolments. Ten years ago the government lowered the number of medical school admissions, the effects of which are now being felt. In 2001 the number of new admissions was raised, but this will not have an immediate impact. While in 2002 the Sault Ste. Marie proposal cited a need for at least 500 more family doctors in 109 communities in Ontario the College of Physicians and Surgeons believes that there will be further decreases in physicians and specialists over the coming decade. In a discussion paper entitled "Tackling the Doctor Shortage", the Ontario College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario call for a 20% increase in the number of postgraduate training positions. This same paper also states that specialty fields are also in a "crisis situation".

There is an Assessment Program for International Medical Graduates (APIMG), which is sponsored and administered by the Ontario Faculties of Medicine. The purpose of the program is to assess fully qualified and recently practicing specialist physicians who have trained in countries whose educational programs are not accredited. This program allows access to certified practice for up to 50 positions each year.

Mr. Donald Scott, President & CEO of Joseph Brant Memorial Hospital has stated that although there has been an increase in the number of spaces in Canadian medical schools to pre-cutback numbers, this, combined with the assessment program for foreign medical graduate licensing, is not enough. The average age of Canadian physicians was 47 years of age at the time of the Sault Ste. Marie resolution two years ago and continues to rise. This combined with a commitment of many new graduates to work life balance, which results in shorter office hours, means that the shortage of physicians and a significant number of patients without a family physician or orphan patients, will continue in the foreseeable future if nothing further is done.

As an example, in Burlington alone, the Ministry of Health has deemed that the city is under-serviced by approximately 24 physicians. This is 20% of the 114 needed to adequately service the community. This takes into account only current needs, without consideration to the fact that most of the city's physicians are already or will be in a critical age for retirement in the next 10 years (40-59 age bracket).

The evidence clearly indicates that accepting foreign-trained physicians at current rates along with what the provinces five medical schools graduate each year will not be able to meet the increasing demand for physician services in our province.

Current income caps imposed by the province on doctors restrict their earning power. Dr. John Rapin, President of the Ontario Medical Association, states "more doctors are leaving the province of Ontario than we are attracting" and that the number of physicians leaving for the province is escalating. One in seven is considering leaving the province and one in five is considering leaving the profession. One in four plans to retire within five years. "Almost half the doctors who leave Ontario migrate to Alberta or British Columbia. Ontario's physician fee schedule is seventh in the country and because of the shortage, many doctors feel compelled to work long hours often in stressful circumstances."

Part of the answer to better health care in Ontario is the need to look to the broadest array of health professionals that can provide primary care. Nurse practitioners are available in limited numbers but could deliver a wide variety of primary care services.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario to:

1. Eliminate the limit on the number of foreign trained physicians accepted through the Assessment Program for International Medical Graduates and expedite the process of approval.
2. Increase the number of spaces by 20% for postgraduate training of doctors in Ontario.
3. Expand the number of primary care services provided by other health professionals such as nurse practitioners.
4. Offer competitive incentives to attract and retain doctors in the province such as mentorship programs, interest free loans for startup and expansion and/or modernization of existing practices, and medical school bursaries.
5. Establish a recruitment program to attract Canadian trained doctors currently practicing in out of province and out of country jurisdictions.

Replaces 2002 resolution "Doctor Shortage Resolution"