



Features

Chroniques

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Southern Ontario towns hang out MD-wanted signs

Barbara Sibbald

A shortage of rural physicians in *southern* Ontario? No, that's not a typo. Although communities in Northern Ontario continue to face shortages, some areas in the southern part of the province are in dire straits.

On Aug. 31, the hospital in Wallaceburg began closing its emergency room from 11 pm to 7 am due to a lack of physicians. Residents of this town of 12 000 now have to drive 30 minutes to Chatham or Sarnia for treatment. This unprecedented step mobilized the town's citizens, who are in the midst of a complex plan to recruit — and retain — doctors. Physicians in southwestern Ontario are also mobilizing. The Southwestern Ontario Rural Medicine Research, Education and Development Unit (SWORM), which is part of the medical school at the University of Western Ontario, convinced the province to hire a community-development officer to help recruit and retain doctors. "Our recruitment efforts thus far have been chaotic," says Dr. James Rourke, director of SWORM. "We need an organized approach to make our job easier."

The new development officer, Jay Orchard, will identify practice opportunities, highlight those that would appeal to graduating physicians and help individual communities find physicians. Orchard could, for instance, suggest setting up a clinic to attract new doctors. Meanwhile, a consultant from Mississauga-based Med-Emerg International has been hired to help Wallaceburg in its search for medical help. Bernie Blais, president and chief executive officer at the Chatham-Kent Health Alliance, says Med-Emerg will review recruitment and retention problems in the town, but that is only part of a master plan. Blais says the alliance has also applied for block funding to replace fee-for-service payments for physicians working in the ER. It has also held focus groups and garnered support from business and local government. "In our view recruitment is a community responsibility, the hospital being a partner in it," says Blais. A recent ad in the *Canadian Journal of Rural Medicine* says "many friendly patients await your arrival."

With the departure of 2 physicians last summer, only 6 doctors remain at Wallaceburg's 45-bed hospital. "In 40 years we've never had to close the ER," says Blais, who hopes the ER will once again be providing around-the-clock service this fall. So far 2 residents have been recruited and there have been 6 other promising leads.

Wallaceburg is not the only community to be hit hard. Southwestern Ontario, in the area from Owen Sound to Windsor, has a population of 1.4 million people, 40% of whom live in communities with fewer than 10 000 people. The area is hardly isolated, since virtually all communities are within a short drive of a major city. Despite this, says Rourke, the area has seen an accelerated shortage of physicians — particularly FPs — in the past 5 years.

He says part of the blame lies with medical schools that don't put enough focus on rural practice. In addition, more new physicians now have spouses with professional careers and it is difficult for them to pursue these careers in rural Ontario.

Rourke also sees a "real transformation" in the attitudes of new graduates. "In my generation, we were businessmen and professionals. We'd buy a practice and run an office. The new doctors want a group practice, not a solo one."

SWORM is considering a range of measures to attract physicians, including programs to provide more support, more opportunities for continuing medical education and more clinical support from nurse practitioners or registered nurses.

"The problem is getting worse," says Rourke. "People are getting desperate." ?