

Communities plead with college over suspension of FP

Some 4000 residents of a rural area in Nova Scotia have signed a petition urging the provincial college not to suspend a local physician who had a romantic relationship with a patient.

Dr. William Hunter Blair, 60, lost his medical licence for a year and must undergo an independent psychiatric assessment at a sexual behaviours clinic. He is also banned from practising psychotherapy.

But the 39-year-old former patient and the 4000 residents of Barrington and Clarks Harbour, 200 km south of Halifax, strongly disagree with the decision. They say the relationship involves consenting adults and that Blair, who has practised in the area for 18 years, did not begin a sexual relationship with Joanna Hyde until after the doctor-patient relationship had ended. The relationship was reported to the college by a colleague of Blair's.

The Nova Scotia Medical Act has strict rules against sexual relationships between physicians and patients, even if the doctor-patient relationship has ended. This is particularly true when psychotherapy is involved.

Hyde was not impressed by those rules. "I will not have a governing body from the land of Oz telling me that my emotions and my affections for someone are somehow misplaced or unhealthy," Hyde said.

This is the first time in the college's history of such cases that a patient has come forward publicly to state that she has no complaint against a doctor charged with professional misconduct. In the last 5 cases of sexual misconduct before the college, the physicians' licences were suspended for at least 18 months.

In support of Blair, and in an effort not to lose 1 of only 3 family physicians in a catchment area of 10 000 people, local residents presented the petition to Dr. Cameron Little, registrar of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Nova Scotia.

Little said the college is sympathetic, but the community's concern about a physician shortage is best addressed by the Department of Health. As for the petition, he said all physicians must be held to the same standard: "You can't have one person slapped on the wrist when for the same thing someone else's licence is removed." — *Donalee Moulton, Halifax*

Pulse

The greying of Canada's medical workforce continues

The Canadian Institute for Health Information reports that the average age of Canadian physicians rose over the last 5 years, from 46.3 years in 1995 to 47.2 years in 1999. The proportion of physicians aged 50 to 59 also increased, from 19.6% in 1995 to 22.8% in 1999. The number of physicians younger than 40 fell during the same period, from 33% of the total to 28.1%.

Although the overall number of physicians relative to the population has remained stable over the last 5 years at about 185 physicians per 100 000 population, the proportion of family physicians relative to the supply of specialists is decreasing. The number of family physicians per 100 000 population dropped by 3.1% between 1995 and 1999, while the number of specialist physicians per 100 000 population rose by 3.4%.

The number of physicians emigrating from Canada continues to decline from the peak levels reached in the mid-1990s, with 585 physicians moving abroad during 1999 and 343 returning. The proportion of specialists migrating (69%) far exceeded that of family physicians (31%), although this has not always been the case. From the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, the proportion of emigrating family physicians was consistently higher than that of specialists.

The average age of physicians leaving the country was 40, while the average age of those returning to active practice in Canada was 41. — *Lynda Buske, buskel@cma.ca*



Average age of Canada's MDs is on the rise

Ontario to train 40 more medical students

Ontario has joined the parade of provinces increasing medical school enrolment. On Aug. 23 it announced a 7.5% boost in enrolment, bringing the provincial total to 572 first-year places. Alberta, Quebec and British Columbia made similar announcements earlier in the year. Ontario's 40 new slots will be spread among all 5 of its medical schools. The University of Toronto will get the most, 13, while McMaster will get 8 and the University of Western Ontario and University of Ottawa will each get 7. Queen's will get 5 additional places. The new spaces will cost the province \$976 000 a year and will help replace some of the roughly 75 spots cut in Ontario in the early 1990s; all of those cuts were made at the University of Toronto.

Dr. Jeff Turnbull, vice-dean of education at the University of Ottawa, says the final go-ahead for the increases wasn't received until Aug. 23, but the medical school had let people on its waiting list know that an increase was probable. "We certainly hope that more increases are in the offing and we've been given preliminary indications that this is the case," he said. He added that the increase, while good news for the 7 additional students accepted at the U of O, remains "a small drop in the bucket." — *Patrick Sullivan, CMAJ*