



appear optimistic that agreement will be reached, the obstetricians have said that if a solution is not found by Feb. 1, all low-risk deliveries will have to be handled by GPs. Obstetricians will be involved only in providing essential and tertiary services for high-risk patients.

Senikas says the insurance issue brought the plight of her specialty into focus in Quebec, where obstetricians make \$252 per vaginal delivery — less than in any province except Newfoundland. She says an obstetrician who handles an average of 120 deliveries a year has a take-home pay of \$20 per delivery. Many obstetricians outside the cities perform even fewer deliveries, but their insurance costs remain the same. Malpractice premiums are expected to reach \$40 000 by 2000.

In recent years, many Quebec obstetricians have become so angry about the situation that they left for the US or other provinces; many others began deciding at a younger age to drop obstetrics and stick to gynecology. "There's no future for our young people here, and they sense it," Senikas argues. "We're doing this for the future of the specialty, before it's too late and people have left or stopped. We're not asking for any increases except for work related to the delivery room."

Obstetricians are seeking reimbursement of their malpractice premiums, so that they would pay \$4900, with the government paying the rest; this arrangement is already in place in Ontario. They also want the fee for a vaginal delivery raised to \$400, an increase in bonuses for evening and night deliveries, and an agreement that any money earned in the delivery room will not be included in the annual salary ceiling of \$257 000.

Meanwhile, the general practitioners who perform 42% of deliveries in Quebec think obstetricians have reason to complain. The 600 GPs who perform obstetrics pay malpractice fees of \$4980 a year. Dr. Jean Ro-

drigues, a spokesperson for the Federation of GPs of Quebec, says it wants to encourage GPs to handle births. In the short term, however, "I think it would be difficult for GPs to deal with the situation" if obstetricians increase their pressure tactics.

Meanwhile, a government council recently proposed that midwives be allowed to practise in hospitals, birthing centres and private homes.

However, it said midwife-assisted births should not take place more than 30 minutes from a hospital. —

© *Janice Hamilton*

## Physician numbers hold steady

The number of physicians in Canada dropped by 48 — or less than 0.1% — in 1996. Figures released by the

## Popularity of laser eye surgery grows in BC

Laser eye surgery is thriving to such an extent on the West Coast that a Vancouver ophthalmologist says British Columbia may be the busiest area for the procedure in North America. Since the first private clinics opened here 7 years ago, says Dr. Hugo Sutton, up to 30 000 eyes have been treated in Vancouver. Sutton, 1 of about 20 BC ophthalmologists active in the field, says these numbers are "approached in Calgary and Windsor, but not in the US." He attributes the popularity of excimer laser photorefractive surgery here to "a recognition of Canadian refractive surgery for its careful due diligence as well as high volume and successful outcomes."

Patients, who can refer themselves, typically pay up to \$5000 for bilateral refractive surgery. Americans account for about 20% of the caseload for Dr. Michael Berman, another ophthalmologist with a laser-surgery clinic in Vancouver. He says Canada's approval process for the second and third generation of laser equipment has been faster than in the US, and this means that American patients may receive more advanced surgical techniques here.

Techniques have been improving. Laser in situ keratomileusis (LASIK) procedures, which in-



**Dr. Michael Berman in the operating room at his Vancouver clinic**

volve cutting the cornea, creating a tissue flap and then applying the laser treatment, began just last year; it now accounts for about 80% of the work in Sutton's clinic.

Why have these procedures become so popular? Sutton says that eliminating glasses or contact lenses is a "life-enhancing procedure for many people." Berman concludes that "people seem to want to be free of glasses and contact lenses," and laser surgery has given him "another lease on ophthalmology." — © *Heather Kent*