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Canadian physician supply on uptick

The demographic face of Canada's physician pool is becoming increasingly rural, foreign-trained, female and slightly greyer.

The number of Canadian physicians rose to 72 529 in 2011, a 4.1% increase over 2010 and part of a 13.9% five-year increase, the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) states in a report, *Supply, Distribution and Migration of Canadian Physicians* (<https://secure.cihi.ca/estore/productFamily.htm?locale=en&pf=PFC1968>).

The uptick, a level not seen since the 1980s, is a product of an increase in quotas at Canadian medical schools and the growing number of foreign-trained physicians who are entering the country, says Geoff Ballinger, manager of health human resources at CIHI. "The biggest chunk is certainly in the increase in seats in the medical schools. ... But we are seeing, as we have for many years, a few more physicians coming back to Canada from abroad."

The number of physicians in Canada has increased by at least two percentage points every year since 2007, while 2011 represented the second time in three years that the increase topped 4%. Canadian medical schools awarded 2533 medical degrees in 2011, an increase of 3.5% from 2010.

The split between family physicians and specialists has remained relatively the same since the 1970s. There were 36 769 family physicians in Canada in 2011, or 50.7% of the overall physician pool.

Whether the slight increase in the overall pool will alleviate complaints that finding a family physician remains harder than a Canadian winter is unclear, Ballinger adds. "We have so many more physicians now than we have ever had, it will be interesting to see, when the various surveys of people who are looking for a physician come out, whether that need is being met. ... We would assume that the increasing number of physicians hopefully would improve access to patients, but we just don't know."

The report indicates that 6247 physicians (8.6% of the overall pool) were practising in rural areas in 2011, serving about six million Canadians (or roughly 18% of the population). Roughly 14.6% (5370) of all family physicians are in rural practice.

Those numbers have improved in recent years primarily because of provincial and federal government financial incentives, such as student loan forgiveness for those who agree to practise in a rural setting for a number of years.

The national physician pool is also growing because of provincial efforts to recruit doctors from abroad.

Approximately 24.5% (17 610) of physicians practicing in Canada in 2011 received their medical degree abroad, a 1.5% increase since 2007. South Africa supplied the most physicians (2285), followed by the United Kingdom (2124), India (1732), Ireland (1143) and Egypt (804).

Ballinger expects the provinces will continue their international recruiting efforts. "I think there is a great concern in Canada and other OECD [Organisation for Economic

Co-operation and Development] countries of attracting foreign-trained doctors, particularly from areas of the world where they can ill afford to lose physicians. But in some countries, they do educate more physicians than they need and sometimes Canada can take advantage of that.”

The report also confirms that women are becoming increasingly more representative in the physician pool. There were 26 423 female physicians in Canada in 2011, representing 36.5% of the overall pool, and 41.6% (15 294) of the family physician pool.

That trend is expected to continue in the future as the growth rate in the number of female physicians in Canada between 2007 and 2011 was 22.6%, as compared with 9.4% for men.

“I think there’s just a process of the feminization of the medical workforce,” Ballinger says. “I think women are just seeing medicine as being just like men, a calling I suppose. And compared to other professions as well I think it’s also one that offers them some flexibility in terms of the lifestyle choices, for example, that women have to make in terms of raising families and so on. I think also the view that medicine is a male-dominated profession is obviously not the case anymore and I think it’s just becoming more appealing.”

There are also slight gender differences in the physician pools of provinces. New Brunswick and Quebec had the highest percentages of female physicians in 2011, at 36% and 42% respectively, while Manitoba (32%), Saskatchewan (32%) and Prince Edward Island (28%) had the lowest.

The report also indicates that the physician pool is slowly aging. The average age of the Canadian physician increased to 50.5 years in 2011 from 49.6 in 2007, despite the increased number of doctors being produced by medical schools. “Actually our physician workforce was at its youngest in 1988,” Ballinger says. “We were expecting that the age point might stabilize a little bit with these new younger physicians coming in, but we haven’t actually seen that. They’ve continued to get older,” possibly because physicians aren’t retiring as early as expected and in some cases, are simply reducing their practice.

The supply statistics also indicate that slightly more physicians (99) returned to Canada between 2007 and 2011, the majority of whom set up a shingle in Ontario, Quebec or Alberta. The number of physicians moving from one province to another was also relatively small. Just 588 (0.8%) shifted jurisdictions in that five-year period, primarily to Alberta and Quebec.

CIHI’s annual report on physician compensation, typically released in conjunction with the supply report, has been delayed until January 2013 because of a lack of data, Ballinger says. — Adam Miller, *CMAJ*

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