



NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR
MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

Health Minister's comments on doctors per capita do not tell the full story

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This week, Health Minister John Haggie was quoted in a CBC interview as saying: *“From a numbers point of view, physicians and nurses, we actually are blessed in terms of numbers per capita.”*

“The issue of physician turnover and the struggle to keep doctors in hard-to-recruit areas in rural Newfoundland and Labrador has been ongoing for decades. The Minister knows this from his time as NLMA President in 2002-2003. It’s time for Minister Haggie to acknowledge the gaps in our health care system and work with us to address the problems we are facing,” said NLMA President Dr. Susan MacDonald.

“About 90,000 Newfoundlanders and Labradorians have no family doctor. If we are so blessed, how does the Minister explain this problem? The number of people without family doctors has grown significantly in places like Stephenville, Corner Brook, Labrador City, Port aux Basques, and Bonavista, St. John’s and Conception Bay North. In recent months we have also seen a spike in physician resignations in the central region. On top of this, we have the worst retention rate of our own medical graduates compared to any other province,” she explained.

Many sites lack adequate cardiology, dermatology, pediatrics, psychiatry, pathology, neurology and obstetrical services. Many hospitals also have a critical shortage of internal medicine specialists.

Last week, the NLMA took part in a Physician Recruitment and Retention Workshop hosted by Memorial University’s Faculty of Medicine. Its purpose was to identify the top priorities for improving physician recruitment and retention.

“A few things stood out for me from the workshop. Our inability to recruit and retain the right number of doctors in our communities has led to heavy workloads, unsustainable on-call demands and inadequate relief support. I also learned how ill-equipped the health care system is to recruit new doctors,” said Dr. MacDonald.

“Our long-standing perceptions were confirmed that the regional health authorities are primarily focused on dealing with urgent, short-term replacements and “putting out fires” rather than forward-looking recruitment. There is no provincial recruitment strategy, no physician human resource plan, and no funding available to meet medical students to cultivate relationships in support of future physician recruitment. Other provinces often do a better job reaching out to our own learners than we do ourselves,” she said.

In 2019, the NLMA commissioned an independent, evidence-based physician human resource forecast that showed an immediate need for 60 new family doctors in 2020, and about 20 more per year over the coming decade. Unfortunately, the Minister has relied on poor quality data that does not accurately measure physician capacity to serve the patients of the province.

“We have hard evidence that demonstrates the need for more doctors in the province, but without a strategy, our health care system continues to be driven by crisis and filling critical gaps with band aid solutions,” said Dr. MacDonald.

“As physicians we have a duty to advocate for the right number of doctors to ensure our patients have access to timely care. If the Minister of Health is content with the status quo, then our issues with physician turnover, provider shortages and wait times will not get better.”

Backgrounder

- Many physicians who are licensed in the province do not have full-time clinical practices. Simply citing the number of licenses does not reveal the true physician capacity in the province. Not all physicians are what's known as "full-time equivalents". For example, some work full-time, while others part-time, some are semi-retired, some may be involved in teaching and research activities or administration.
- There are also physicians who maintain a license in Newfoundland and Labrador, but do not actually live here. Some come here to provide temporary locums and then leave again.
- Not all family doctors are community-based with a large group of patients. Many of them work in emergency departments, take care of in-patients in hospitals and long-term care, teach at Memorial University, work in health administration, etc.
- Newfoundland and Labrador has the fastest aging population in the country. The province has the highest mortality rates for cancer, cardiac disease and stroke. We also have the highest rates of chronic disease in Canada and a higher proportion of seniors living with three or more chronic diseases. Therefore, a true physician resource plan must go further than simply the number of physicians per capita. It must also measure patient demographics, disease burden in the population and the expected demands for care and medical services.
- Over the past decade, the number of services purchased by MCP from family physicians has stayed constant. This means that despite the larger number of licensed physicians, the actual number of services provided to patients under MCP did not change. Government is buying the same number of services as before but patients are older and sicker and physicians are not seeing as many in clinic per day. Patients are more complex and need more time to be managed well.
- Each spring, the NLMA produces membership statistics following membership renewal in February. As of April 14, 2021, there are 591 family physicians practicing in the province and 737 specialists.
- In 2019, Dr. David Peachey of the Nova Scotia health care consulting firm Health Intelligence Inc., was commissioned by the NLMA to develop a family physician forecast for the province. When considering the proportion of physician practices dedicated to patient care, the report determined there were 431 family physicians in the province who are "full-time equivalents".
- The report also predicted the need for additional family doctors based on current shortages, the growing number of older adults, the burden of illness, current recruitment efforts, physician turnover, and expected retirements. The report forecasted that an additional 60 full-time family physicians were needed in 2020 to address the current shortages. The report also forecasted that an average of about 20 more family doctors per year will be needed in the remaining nine years of the forecast period, for a total of 243 additional family doctors over the coming decade to meet the predicted needs of the population.

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