News Release

New study finds large gap between Memorial medical graduates who intended to practise in NL compared to those who stayed

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St. John's, NL – A recent study surveying past graduates of Memorial University's School of Medicine has found a large gap in the number of physicians who originally intended to practise medicine in Newfoundland and Labrador before completing their training compared to those who currently work in the province.

"We wanted to find out what proportion of graduates of MUN Medicine desired or intended to work in the province, and if they ultimately practice here after training," says Dr. Andrew O'Keefe, survey organizer. "These numbers point to the ever-increasing issue of physician recruitment and retention in Newfoundland and Labrador."

Drs. Monica Kidd, Andrew O'Keefe, and Gerard Farrell surveyed approximately 300 physicians who graduated from Memorial University's medical school between 2003-2018. The survey, conducted in the fall of 2021, found that of the 294 respondents, 78% (229) indicated that they wanted to work exclusively in the province, or at least preferred to work in the province over another location, at the beginning of their post-graduate training. However, only 55% (161) of respondents were working in Newfoundland and Labrador at the time of the survey.

"These findings show that almost 80% of respondents wanted to work here, but only about half of them actually do. We want to understand what helps graduates stay and practice in Newfoundland and Labrador, and alternatively what are the barriers to doing so," Dr. O'Keefe said.

Newfoundland and Labrador is currently experiencing a crisis in health care, most notably seen by the approximately 99,000 people without a family doctor. Despite having a medical school that graduates dozens of new doctors each year, the province does not have enough physicians to meet the needs of its residents.

The study organizers aim to use focus groups to further explore the experiences of survey respondents working in their preferred practice location.

The study abstract is provided below.

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BACKGROUND

Maintaining a skilled health care workforce is a challenge for all rural and remote parts of the world [1-4]. Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) has an ageing population, high dependency-to-worker ratio (Health Intelligence Inc., 2019) and among the highest incidence of multimorbidity in Canada [5,6]. A 2014 analysis found that while nearly 90% of Memorial University physician alumni were working in Canada, only about one-third were working in NL [7]. We examine intended and current practice location of physician graduates of Memorial University throughout stages of training, as an exploratory study in identifying barriers to physician recruitment in NL.

METHODS

We administered a 25-question, online mixed-methods survey to graduates of Memorial University Faculty of Medicine between 2003-2018. We collected demographic information and queryeed intended and current practice location at various stages of training, as well as information describing their experience with recruitment. Participants accessed the survey through a link distributed through targeted social media, additionally employing a modified Dillman method to improve response rate [8].

RESULTS

Approximately 1040 people graduated from Memorial University's medical school between 2003-2018. We had an estimated response rate of 28.3%. Of 294 respondents, 234 (79.6%) indicated that when they began medical undergraduate medical training, they wanted to work in NL exclusively, or at least preferred to work in NL; at the beginning of post-graduate training, 229 (77.9%) endorsed wanting to work exclusively in NL or at least preferred NL over another location. However, only161 (54.8%) of respondents were working in NL at the time of the survey.

CONCLUSION

We found a large gap between the number of physicians who, as learners, intended to practice in NL and those who actually were (60 (20.4%) physicians as medical students, and 65 (22.1%) as residents). Many offered narrative responses regarding how recruitment by health authorities did or did not aid their efforts to establish practice. We aim to use focus groups to further explore enabling factors and barriers our respondents experience working in their preferred practice location.

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