



**NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR
MEDICAL ASSOCIATION**

Five health centres in Central will soon lose their last doctor

April 11, 2022

St. John's, NL – The Newfoundland and Labrador Medical Association has confirmed that by the end of June, five health centres in the central region will lose their last doctor.

The last remaining physicians at the health centres in Fogo, Harbour Breton, Baie Verte and Buchans have all tendered their resignations and will depart these communities between April and June. The health centre in St. Alban's has already lost its last doctor. The NLMA is unaware whether new recruits or locum physicians are available for these sites.

“People living in these communities deserve better. The government of Newfoundland and Labrador is no longer providing them with access to the most basic medical services that all Canadians should expect in 2022,” said NLMA President Dr. Susan MacDonald.

“Rural health centres are in immediate crisis and need a proportionate response. The Health Accord is a 5-10 year plan to address long-term problems in the health system. However, the people of the province cannot wait this long for access to medical services,” she added.

Rural health centres provide family medicine to people in the community and surrounding towns, as well as residents in long-term care. They also provide citizens with access to 24/7 emergency departments. Physicians are on-call after hours and are ready to respond to patients requiring critical care in the middle of the night.

To function properly, these health centres usually need a minimum of three to four physicians to handle the onerous burden of being on call. Unfortunately, many rural health centres are just one or two resignations away from a crisis.

“When doctors are forced to do call every night or every second night, it leads to significant burnout. People can only keep this up for so long before it takes a toll on their quality of life. Eventually, they pack up and leave because the burden of being the only available doctor is too great,” said Dr. MacDonald.

“When a community loses its physicians, it makes recruiting new doctors incredibly difficult. No one wants to be the only doctor responsible for the primary care of an entire community or having to shoulder the burden of emergency services alone,” she added.

Doctors have been warning government for years that the province's rural health centres would become destabilized unless drastic steps were taken to recruit physicians. Government has responded by investing in virtual emergency departments.

“Virtual ERs are not the standard of care. They are a short-term measure when a health centre is in a bind, but it does not replace a physician on site. The virtual ER cannot always provide the required care and some patients must be transported over the highway to the nearest hospital. This means they are waiting longer for care at a time when every minute counts. It also puts added pressure on the receiving hospital where other patients are already waiting,” explained Dr. MacDonald.

“The government has announced new bursaries and grants to help attract new doctors, and the NLMA supports these measures. But these strategies are the same tools being used by other provinces, and while they will work in normal times, they are not enough to deal with a crisis. Government must put extraordinary measures in place now to save these health centres. It must not turn its back on rural Newfoundland and Labrador.”

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