



NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR
MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

New polling results show a growing number of patients without a family doctor

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St. John's, NL – A newly released poll conducted by Narrative Research in August 2019 shows that 19% of people in Newfoundland and Labrador do not have a family doctor.

Each year, the Newfoundland and Labrador Medical Association (NLMA) commissions Narrative Research (formerly Corporate Research Associates) to survey Newfoundlanders and Labradorians about their access to family doctors.

“The new polling numbers indicate that this is a growing problem,” said NLMA President Dr. Charlene Fitzgerald. “In 2014, 11% of the population reported not having a family doctor. In 2017, that number had grown to 13%. Today it is 19%. This represents two in ten people or as many as 99,000 residents without a family doctor.”

Approximately, 48% of people without a family doctor say they rely on walk-in clinics for their primary health care needs and 42% report relying on hospital emergency departments.

“Every citizen deserves to have a continuous relationship with a family doctor, but in our province family medicine is eroding. We are simply not recruiting and retaining enough family doctors to keep pace with the growing needs of our population. This is a systemic problem that physicians have been warning the government about for years. Efforts to date are not working and we need a broader and more thorough response to this problem,” said Dr. Fitzgerald.

“The NLMA put its solutions in a vision paper more than a year ago and presented it to the government. We called on government to prepare a provincial physician human resource plan that identifies the appropriate number and placement of family physicians to meet the province’s current and future primary health care needs. To get this process started, the NLMA has commissioned health human resource consultant Dr. David Peachey to conduct a family physician human resource forecast that will be presented to the provincial government later in the fall,” she explained.

The NLMA also plans to meet with Health Minister Dr. John Haggie on Wednesday to discuss potential solutions to address the family doctor shortage.

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NEWS RELEASE

Backgrounder

- The NLMA estimates there are currently about 610 family physicians licensed to practice in the province. Not all of these family doctors are providing comprehensive community family medicine. Some are working in hospitals, some are working in emergency departments, others in specialized clinics (e.g. addictions medicine, cancer clinics, etc.). Some are part time, some are semi-retired, some are temporary substitute locums, others are in administrative roles and some may be involved in teaching or research activities.
- While the number of practicing family physicians in the province has gone up in recent years, the most growth in NLMA membership among family physicians is occurring in the locum and ER categories.
- The actual number of services provided to patients under MCP has not increased in recent years. Between 2011 and 2017, the number of services purchased by MCP from family physicians stayed constant at about 2.5 million services.
- The province continues to struggle to retain family physicians. Excluding temporary locums, 41 new family doctors began practice in the province in 2018. That same year, 42 physicians ended their practices because they either retired or left the province.
- While Memorial University excels at training family physicians, the number of MUN medical graduates who enter family practice in this province after they have completed their residency training is declining. About 30 or more MUN medical graduates enter family medicine residency programs each year. NLMA membership data shows that five to six years ago about 14-15 MUN graduates per year were starting family practice in this province after their residency, but this number has since dropped to an average of 8 to 9 per year.
- According to the NLMA membership database, of the Memorial University family medicine graduates who completed their residency training in 2018, only nine began family practice in the province. Of those nine, only three (3) entered a community-based family practice. The others began work in hospitals or as locums.
- About 20% of family doctors in the province are over the age of 60. Many senior doctors with large patient panels are now retiring without enough new doctors to replace them. In 2019, at least eight family doctors announced their retirements in the St. John's area alone. A similar situation occurred in the Conception Bay North region within the past few years, and that area is still grappling with thousands of orphaned patients. There are also many other rural areas in the province that remain woefully under-served due to a chronic shortage of family doctors.