



NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR
MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

New report sheds light on province's family doctor shortage

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St. John's, NL – Today, the Newfoundland and Labrador Medical Association (NLMA) released a Family Physician Human Resource Forecast that identifies the current shortage of family doctors in the province, as well as the projected demand for physicians over the next 10 years to meet the needs of the population.

“For years, the NLMA has been saying the province has a problem with access to primary care and a shortage of family doctors. This view is also held by 92% of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians who, according to 2019 polling by Narrative Research, believe there are too few doctors in the province. Today, we have hard evidence that supports this,” said NLMA President Dr. Charlene Fitzgerald.

In the absence of a provincial physician human resource plan, the NLMA commissioned Dr. David Peachey of the Nova Scotia health care consulting firm Health Intelligence Inc., to develop a family physician forecast for the province. Dr. Peachey has completed similar work for the governments of Nova Scotia, Alberta, Yukon, the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. He is also a family physician.

From a simple headcount perspective, there are 629 family physicians licensed to practice in the province. However, many family medicine practices involve much more than community-based clinics. When considering the proportion of physician practices dedicated to patient care, the report determined there are actually 431 family physicians in the province who are “full-time equivalents”.

The report also predicts 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 forecasts that an additional 60 full-time family physicians are needed immediately to address the current shortage in today's workforce. This includes 24 additional family doctors in the Eastern region, 12 in Central, 12 in the Western region and at least 11 in the Labrador-Grenfell region.

The report also forecasts 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.

“The need for a plan has now reached a critical level. In September, the NLMA released public polling results which showed that as many as 99,000 residents of the province, or 1 in 5 people, do not have a family doctor. We are simply not recruiting enough family doctors to take on these unattached patients or to keep pace with the growing needs of our population,” said Dr. Fitzgerald.

“As a result, many patients are now relying on emergency room visits for non-emergency medical attention. We are also seeing a growing number of patients arriving at emergency departments with advanced stages of disease because they are not being managed by a family doctor.”

This week, the NLMA presented the provincial government with new proposals aimed at recruiting more Memorial University family medicine residents into community practices as soon as possible. The NLMA has also provided recommendations to help unattached patients who do not have a family doctor. This includes the creation of practice sites for unattached patients and expansion of physician practices to include nurses and nurse practitioners.

“This forecast is based on the needs of our population. The government must now decide whether it will make policy and budget decisions in light of these needs,” said Dr. Fitzgerald.

“Ultimately, the provincial government is responsible for attracting the right number of doctors to meet the needs of our population. We are calling on the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador to use this forecast and adopt a family physician human resource plan. We also ask them to approve our proposals so that the job of attaching patients to family doctors can begin without delay.”

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Backgrounder

Dr. David Peachey, MD

David Peachey is a principal of Health Intelligence Inc., a Halifax-based health care consulting firm with clients in the public, private, and not-for-profit sectors. Prior to establishing the consulting firm in 1995, he was the Director of Professional Affairs at the Ontario Medical Association for ten years. His clinical experience included comprehensive family medicine, emergency medicine, and urgent care. Consulting work has focused on physician compensation and funding models, provincial and territorial physician workforce and clinical services planning, fee schedule reform, clinical governance, compensation database development and analysis, physician accountability, and measurement of clinical performance. In addition to successfully completing provincial workforce and clinical services plans for seven provinces and territories, he has presented workshops on physician compensation models and performance measures, consulted on the reforming of medical services, and advised governments on delivery and funding models for medical care. He has been the lead consultant on a number of projects analyzing physician compensation models and trends, drafting revisions to fee schedules and preambles, and conducting inter-provincial fee schedule comparisons and billing scenario analyses. Clients have included federal, provincial, and territorial governments, professional associations, and the Canadian Institute for Health Information.