



Gerard Farrell, MD

New incentive to address Category A ERs in crisis may destabilize other sites

Dear Colleagues:

The Department of Health and Community Services has informed the NLMA that Newfoundland and Labrador Health Services is facing coverage issues later in 2023 for emergency departments in Corner Brook, Carbonear, Stephenville, St. Anthony, Labrador City and Clarenville. These emergency rooms are part of the "Category A" network, which are the larger emergency rooms in the province.

The Department of Health has informed us that they will be introducing a new incentive program to recruit physicians to take shifts at emergency rooms in these 6 hospitals. The program will provide an escalating incentive depending on the number of shifts of ER coverage provided by a physician. The government is describing it as a one-year pilot project. We have not yet seen the specific terms and conditions and therefore have many questions about how the program is designed.

The NLMA was consulted on this idea two weeks ago, when the list of sites contained only two locations. We expressed great concern about this proposal. While we empathize with the difficult position of the government and the health authority, and while we acknowledge this program may attract some locum physicians from outside the province, an incentive available only to limited sites will draw doctors from other sites and displace the problem rather than resolve it. There is a high risk that doctors will be attracted away from sites that are barely stable at present, and away from Category B hospitals and community family medicine clinics where they are caring for patients fortunate enough to have a family doctor.

The expansion of the program to 6 sites does not address our concern. In fact, there is a high likelihood the new program will have negative impacts on the other four rural Category A sites in Grand Falls-Windsor, Gander, Happy Valley-Goose Bay and Burin, as well as in St. John's and among doctors at the six sites who will be ineligible for the incentive. All these doctors provide high quality care, and often take more shifts than they would prefer, but will not receive an incentive. They will feel demoralized that their work is being under-valued.

The real problem is the shortage of physicians throughout the whole province. The new incentive program will diminish the current pool of doctors who are doing other important jobs in the health system. The real solution is to expand the number of doctors in the province. We know the government is focusing on this problem, but we have not yet turned the corner towards improved results.

Our alternate suggestion would address difficult-to-fill shifts at all hospitals and create a sense of equity across all sites. We proposed to negotiate a two-tier rate for all Category A sites: a rate for day-time work, and a rate for difficult to fill night and weekend/stat holiday work. However, the government has not engaged with us in a negotiation along these lines.

We would appreciate feedback from affected members about the impacts of this program. You can write to me at president@nlma.nl.ca.

Sincerely,

Gerard Farrell

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Gerard Farrell".

President

The logo for the Newfoundland & Labrador Medical Association, featuring a stylized, cursive "NLMA" in blue.

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