



NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR
MEDICAL ASSOCIATION

Reduced immigration quotas mean Newfoundland and Labrador must rethink its approach to physician recruitment and retention

January 17, 2025

St. John's, NL – The Federal Government's decision to reduce Newfoundland and Labrador's economic immigration spaces by 50 per cent—from 3,050 to 1,525 annually—over the next three years poses a significant challenge to the province's efforts to recruit international professionals, including doctors.

“This decision should be a wake-up call for the provincial government and is a clear signal it needs to reassess its recruitment and retention strategies for physicians,” said Dr. Steve Major, President of the Newfoundland and Labrador Medical Association (NLMA).

International medical graduates account for 30 per cent of the province's physician workforce. However, recruiting these professionals has become increasingly difficult due to growing competition from other provinces.

“While the provincial government has spent substantial amounts of money travelling overseas to recruit health care professionals, these efforts have done little to alleviate the province's physician shortages,” said Dr. Major. “In fact, we now have fewer internationally trained physicians working in Newfoundland and Labrador than we did a decade ago.”

Doctor Retention Crisis

According to the Canadian Institute for Health Information, Newfoundland and Labrador continues to have the highest rate of physician out-migration compared to any other province.

“Our inability to retain doctors is having detrimental effects on our health care system and our patients,” said Dr. Major. “During a recent provincial tour of 10 hospitals, I heard firsthand from physicians about service gaps and shortages at each site. These shortages are causing unacceptable wait times, emergency department closures, patient diversions, reduced access to specialists, delayed surgeries, clinic shutdowns, and an overreliance on virtual care to bridge these gaps.”

The impact of these shortages were underscored in a new study released this week from the C.D. Howe Institute titled *Troubling Diagnosis: Comparing Canada's Healthcare with International Peers*. The study ranked Newfoundland and Labrador the lowest province across all categories of health care performance, including access to regular doctors, urgent care, wait times for specialists, and elective surgeries, among other targets.

Recruitment Efforts Need a Retention Focus

The province has launched several initiatives to address this crisis, including return-in-service agreements, signing bonuses, increased medical school seats, and new licensure pathways. While these measures are important, Dr. Major emphasized the need for a stronger focus on retention.

“Any province with a top-tier medical school like ours should not be facing physician shortages. We need to start prioritizing retaining our medical graduates. We cannot afford to keep training doctors only to lose them to other provinces. We need them here, serving our communities,” said Dr. Major.

“We must also create an environment where internationally trained physicians feel welcomed, valued and supported, as our health care system heavily relies on their contributions. Unfortunately, persistent shortages often leave these physicians working in isolation, shouldering an overwhelming on-call workload with minimal backup. These challenges make it difficult to retain them long-term and undermine our ability to build a sustainable workforce.”

Urgent Need for National Competitiveness

A key goal for the NLMA is achieving national competitiveness for physician compensation to address long-standing physician shortages and challenges with retention.

“Physician recruitment and retention are national challenges, so Newfoundland and Labrador must be able to compete within the Canadian market,” said Dr. Major. “Being average within Atlantic Canada has not worked. Without substantial improvements, doctors will continue to leave, and patient access will continue to decline.”

The NLMA and the provincial government are currently in negotiations for a new contract for physicians. The parties have moved out of bargaining and have entered a dispute settlement process involving mediation and possibly arbitration.

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