

The Doctor Shortage: Is Canada on the road to recovery?

By Steve Slade, Vice President, Research and Analysis, CAPER-ORIS, AFMC

In January 2008, Maclean's magazine reported that "five million Canadians are currently without a family doctor-and things are only getting worse"¹. To be sure, Canada does not fare well when compared to other developed countries using indicators like doctor-to-population ratios and wait times. Furthermore, the statistics are backed up by anecdotal stories of people trying to find doctors. But are things really only going to get worse?

This is a tough question and, with so many factors at play, the future is uncertain. However, it is certain that medical education uptake will factor into any effort to deal with the doctor shortage. Furthermore, we know that medical enrolment has taken a sharp upturn in recent years and there are calls for continued expansion. While the full force of this growth has yet to be felt, the data clearly show that relief is on the horizon.

As shown in Figure 1, Canada's faculties of medicine and governments have taken enormous strides in ramping up physician supply. The columns in Figure 1 show that first year enrolment has gone from 1,577 in 1997/98 to 2,569 in 2007/08. While the increase has been gradual, there are now almost one thousand more students entering medical school each year. The line in Figure 1 illustrates cumulative growth in the number of medical students entering the system since 1997/98; it is plotted on the right hand vertical axis of the chart. If first year MD

program class sizes remained at the 1997/98 level, 1,577 students would have entered medical school each year for the past 10 years and the cumulative growth line would lie flat along the horizontal axis – at 0. In fact, incremental increases in first year MD program enrolment have resulted in an additional 4,855 students entering the medical training system since 1997/98.

In grappling with the realities of the doctor shortage, we need to bear in mind the many factors that will remedy it. Medical school enrolment is of great consequence and, indeed, some would argue that changes in this area sparked the doctor shortage. Perhaps it is apropos that change in this area will lead to its resolution. First year medical school class sizes have topped 2,500 and Dr. Nick Busing, President and CEO of the Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada, urges that "we need to be talking about a target minimum of 3,000 entry-level positions for Canadians, and get there as quickly as possible"¹. Many of the new medical students are still in the education system and it will take some time before they exit. However, as medical classes continue to expand, and as new doctors begin to see patients, we will begin to feel like we are on the road to recovery from the doctor shortage.

1. Gulli C, Lunau K. *Adding Fuel to the Doctor Crisis: Five million Canadians are currently without a family doctor – and things are only getting worse*. Maclean's, 14 January 2008, p. 62.

Figure 1: First Year MD Program Enrolment and Cumulative Increase in Number of Additional Medical Students Above 1997/98 Level, Canada, 1997/98 - 2007/08

