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Survey of 12,000 Physicians Shows Doctors at the Breaking Point

Physician recruiters hear daily from doctors who are dissatisfied with their practices and who wish to either find more favorable practice settings or opt out of medicine altogether.

Health care policymakers and the general public, however, are generally less attuned than recruiters are to the rising levels of stress and professional dissatisfaction that many physicians are experiencing. There is a common perception that the majority of physicians today are wealthy and that medicine remains the lucrative and satisfying career it has long been perceived to be.

It is for this reason that the Physicians' Foundation, a national group of physician and medical society leaders, decided to conduct one of the most comprehensive physician surveys ever attempted. Established as a result of a lawsuit brought by 20 medical societies against the managed care industry, the Physicians' Foundation is a grant-making organization dedicated to improving the medical practice environment for physicians and patients (See www.physiciansfoundation.org for more information and complete survey results.). The Physicians' Foundation's goal for the survey was to determine to the greatest extent possible how physicians themselves feel about medicine and the overall environment in which they practice today.

The Physicians' Foundation commissioned Merritt Hawkins & Associates to develop the survey, which was mailed to over 320,000 physicians in all 50 states. Of these physicians, 270,000 are in primary care, defined as family practice, general internal

medicine, pediatrics, and obstetrics/gynecology, and the remaining 50,000 are in a variety of surgical and diagnostic specialties. The Physicians' Foundation decided to emphasize primary care doctors in the survey because it is perceived that these types of physicians are under the greatest financial, professional, and personal stress. In addition, primary care physicians provide the foundation of health care delivery, since they coordinate care for the entire patient and are the gatekeepers to the system. Without a sufficient number of primary care doctors, health care delivery becomes untenable.

Fifty-two percent of the respondents were 51 years of age or older; the remaining 48 percent were 50 or younger. The survey population, therefore, is a few percentage points older on average than the general physician population. One-third of the respondents were female and the remaining two-thirds were male, so the survey population includes slightly more females than the overall physician population.

The survey consisted of 48 questions regarding medical practice today, with a number of questions having multiple subsets, each requiring a response. Approximately 12,000 physicians responded to the survey, which includes well over 800,000 individual data points. In addition, the survey provided space for physicians to submit written comments regarding what they would tell the general public and policymakers about the state of medical practice today. Over 4,000 physicians provided comments, ranging from one-word exclamations such as "Help!" to multiple pages of detailed exposition. Survey results and methodologies were submitted to

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Chad Autry, PhD, of the Neeley School of Business at Texas Christian University, for evaluation and analysis. Dr. Autry concluded the survey has an error rate of less than one percent.

The survey, entitled "The Physicians' Perspective: Medical Practice in 2008," paints a sobering picture of today's medical workforce and has important implications for anyone concerned with the issues of physician supply and patient access to medical services. Key findings of the survey, grouped under subject headings, are listed on page 3.

What emerges from the survey responses is a sense that many physicians, particularly primary care doctors, are being pushed to the brink by declining reimbursement, higher thresholds of third-party paperwork and interference, the threat of malpractice, and time constraints imposed by the need to work harder and longer. Many appear eager to take steps that would reduce patient access to physician services at a time when the nation already is experiencing a physician shortage.

In particular, 11 percent said they plan to retire in the next one to three years. Even many of the younger physicians surveyed said that they soon plan to retire. Thirteen percent of physicians indicated they plan to seek non-clinical jobs, such as management positions, that would remove them from direct patient care. Twenty percent indicated they plan to reduce the number of patients they see, and 10 percent said they plan to work part time.

Over seven percent indicated they plan to work on a locum tenens basis, which would keep them in patient care roles, but would likely reduce the volume of patients they see. Seven percent also indicated they plan to open concierge practices. In the concierge

model, physicians typically charge an upfront retainer to a limited number of patients in return for open access to their services. Concierge medicine may offer a

higher quality of care to patients who can afford it, but is likely to reduce overall patient access to physicians by making such access more expensive. In addition, 78 percent of respondents indicated they are already at full capacity or are "overwhelmed." Asking physicians who already are over-worked to work harder is no solution to the doctor shortage.

Interestingly, it is commonly observed that younger physicians work fewer hours than older physicians, contributing to the physician shortage. This is not borne out by the survey, however, which indicates the hours worked by physicians ages 35 to 50 are virtually the same as those worked by physicians 51 and older. The survey also indicates that female physicians work approximately the same number of hours as male doctors.

In speaking to physicians about why they became doctors, it is common to hear that they were inspired by a relative, mentor, or other role model who encouraged them to enter the medical field. It is therefore disturbing to note that 60 percent of physicians surveyed said they would not recommend medicine as a career to their own children or to other young people.

These trends do not bode well for the state of physician supply in the future. Survey results are particularly relevant in light of the renewed interest in health care reform brought about by the recent presidential election. Candidates from both political parties pledged to expand access to health care to virtually every American. This goal cannot be accomplished without a physician workforce that is both adequate in numbers and otherwise prepared to see a growing volume of patients. The survey strongly suggests that today's physician workforce is unequipped for the challenges that universal access would present.

Survey responses are dramatically reinforced by the thousands of comments physicians

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MARKET WATCH

Key Findings of “The Physicians’ Perspective: Medical Practice in 2008” Survey

The Physician Shortage

- The great majority of doctors surveyed — 78% — believe there is a shortage of primary care physicians in America today.
- 49% of physicians indicated they will take one or more steps in the next one to three years that will reduce or eliminate patient access to their practices:
 - o 11% said they plan to retire
 - o 13% said they will pursue a job in a non-patient care setting
 - o 20% said they will cut back on patients seen
 - o 10% said they will work part time
 - o 7.5% said they will work locum tenens
 - o 7% said they will switch to concierge practices
- 78% said they are either at “full capacity” or are “overworked and overextended”
- 63% said non-clinical paperwork has caused them to spend less time per patient

Morale

- Only 6% described the professional morale of their colleagues as “positive”
- 78% said medicine is either “no longer rewarding” or “less rewarding”
- 60% said they would not recommend medicine as a career to young people
- 42% said that, given the alternatives, they are ready to accept a single-payer, Canadian style system

Finances

- Only 17% rated the financial position of their practices as “healthy and profitable”
- 82% said their practices would be “unsustainable” if proposed cuts to Medicare reimbursement are made
- 65% said Medicaid reimbursement is less than their cost of providing care
- 36% said Medicare reimbursement is less than their cost of providing care
- 33% have closed their practices to Medicaid patients
- 12% have closed their practices to Medicare patients

Source: “The Physicians’ Perspective: Medical Practice in 2008,” Physicians’ Foundation, www.physiciansfoundation.org. This study was conducted for the Physicians’ Foundation by Merritt Hawkins & Associates. www.merrithawkins.com

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included on the surveys — comments that reflect a deeply demoralized physician workforce. There are too many to cite here, but one comment is particularly indicative of the sentiments many doctors expressed: “Something has got to be done, and urgently, to incentivize medical students to go into primary care and help those of us who are burned out to find renewed joy in seeing patients. Malpractice, government regulations... the whole thing has spun out

of control. I plan to retire early even though I still love seeing patients. The hassles are just too burdensome.”

If there is positive news in the survey, it is the fact that physician recruiters are in a position to assist physicians and make their lives easier. Many physicians believe that the challenges and frustrations they face are universally pervasive and that their only recourse is either to retire or to cut back in some way. The fact is, however, that the

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What’s New at NEJM?

YOUNG PHYSICIANS AND THEIR INITIAL PRACTICE PREFERENCES

To help physician recruiters and the academic community better understand how young physicians go about selecting a practice, NEJM sponsored a study conducted by the Center for Workforce Studies at the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) that featured a series of structured focus groups, with senior residents completing their residency training at six institutions throughout the country. For more information on how to receive a copy of the study, please e-mail us at nejmjobssupport@nejm.org or visit the “employer” section on nejmjobs.org to download a PDF.

**UPCOMING
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MEETINGS
AND MEDICAL
CONVENTIONS**

**American College
of Cardiology***
March 29–31, 2009
Orlando, FL
www.acc.org/

**National Association of
Physician Recruiters***
April 15–17, 2009
Las Vegas, NV
www.napr.org

**American College
of Physicians***
April 23–25, 2009
Philadelphia, PA
www.acponline.org
(800) 523-1546, ext. 2544

**Association of Program
Directors in Internal
Medicine***
April 27–29, 2009
Dallas, TX
www.apdim.med.edu
(800) 622-4558

*Call (800) 635-6991
for more details on
FREE bonus convention
distribution of your paid
recruitment ad at these
conventions in select cities.

PROMOTIONAL NOTES/NEWS

**Reach Over 30,000 Final-Year Residents and Fellows for FREE
with the February 26, 2009, Resident Reach Issue!***

Run a paid advertisement in the February Resident Reach issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, and in addition to the 200,000 physicians that read NEJM regularly, you'll reach 30,000+ final-year residents and fellows in ALL specialties for FREE!*

Your ad will be reprinted in a special booklet and mailed to these job-seeking physicians, giving you the best access to the candidates. You can also connect to thousands of top physicians online, as your ad can also be posted to NEJM CareerCenter (nejmjobs.org).**

ISSUE	CLOSING DATE	SPECIALTIES
February 26	February 6	All Specialties — Over 100!

NEW, Added E-mail Exposure!

Your recruitment message will receive additional exposure, as NEJM sends a targeted e-mail message that drives job seekers to your advertisement on the searchable jobs database AND via a link to the NEJM Resident Reach PDF featured on the home page of NEJM CareerCenter.**

All nejmjobs.org online advertisers receive FREE access to our profiles database where recruiters can access the most up-to-date profiles of highly qualified, active and passive physician job seekers.***

Contact us at (800) 635-6991 or nejmads@nejm.org to reserve your ad space for this issue and for complete promotional details.

*The recruitment section of the February 26, 2009, NEJM issue is reprinted and mailed to more than 30,000 final-year residents and fellows in all specialties whose address records appear in the AMA database. Counts are estimates only and are subject to change based on data collected by the AMA.

**Processing fees may apply to posting your ad to the searchable part of the website.

***Advertisers must have an active job posting in order to access the profiles database. Duration of access is dependent on duration of online posting.

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pattern of medical practice in the United States is not uniform, but instead resembles a mosaic. There are differences between regions of the country and between individual practices. Recruiters who can offer doctors a refuge from uncertain reimbursement, burdensome paperwork, extended hours, high malpractice rates, and other ills (and who can convince doctors that the grass really is greener at their opportunities) stand a very good chance of succeeding in today's problematic medical practice environment.

Source: "The Physicians' Perspective: Medical Practice in 2008," was conducted by the Physicians' Foundation, a grant-making organization dedicated to improving the medical practice environment for physicians and patients. www.physiciansfoundation.org. Phillip Miller, the author of this article, is vice president of communications for Merritt Hawkins & Associates, a national physician search and consulting firm and a division of AMN Healthcare, who was commissioned by the Physicians' Foundation to conduct the study. Mr. Miller may be reached at pmiller@mhagroup.com.