INSTRUCTIONS: Read the following selection, “Family physicians – an endangered species?” and answer the multiple-choice questions. For each question, select the best answer and record your choice on the Answer Sheet provided.

Family physicians – an endangered species?

by Jack Burak

1 Many Canadians are aware that problems with the nation’s health care system have resulted in a lack of hospital beds and medical equipment, overcrowded emergency rooms, long surgical and diagnostic waiting lists, and not enough long term care homes. But with 3.6 million Canadians unable to find a family doctor, a particularly insidious and growing problem is making itself evident.

2 The family doctor is the cornerstone of the nation’s health care system. The vast majority of Canadians have said many times over that they want their family doctor to be their first point of contact in the health care system. Nevertheless, family doctors are becoming a dying breed. With diminishing access to that first point of contact, many Canadians in need of medical help are finding it increasingly difficult to receive timely and appropriate care. In my province of British Columbia, the conservative estimate is that 200,000 British Columbians looking for a family doctor cannot find one.

3 There are many reasons for this predicament. Over the last 10 years, the number of medical students choosing family practice as their lifelong career has been dropping at a startling rate. It used to be that 50% of students chose family practice as their first choice. As of 1997, that proportion had fallen to 35%; in 2004, it has declined further to 24%. At a time when the population is living longer and increasing in size, these are alarming statistics.

4 When asked why they lack interest in family medicine, students cite a daunting student debt load (often more than $100,000 upon graduation) and the long hours required of a doctor who is managing a family practice. As in other kinds of work, young doctors today want a balance between their professional and personal lives.

\[\text{Number of BC Doctors Accepting Patients}\]

- Dec '99: 1,370
- April '99: 1,420
- June '00: 1,277
- May '01: 1,068
- March '04: 599

\[\text{Number of BC Doctors Accepting Patients}\]

- Dec '00: 1,225
- May '03: 633
- Nov '03: 607

\[\text{Number of BC Doctors Accepting Patients}\]

- May '01: 1,068
- March '04: 599

\[\text{Number of BC Doctors Accepting Patients}\]

1 insidious: working secretly or subtly
5 In BC this problem is compounded because the province produces fewer medical graduates per capita than any other province in Canada with a medical school. The number of graduates in BC is slowly rising – this year the University of British Columbia faculty of medicine graduated 128 students, up from 120. The provincial government has committed itself to doubling the number of medical student graduates to 256. When residency programs are taken into account, however, we will not see the full effects of this initiative until some time between 2016 and 2019. This strategy doesn’t come close to giving us the 400 new doctors needed each year in BC to replace those who are retiring, moving out of the province, reducing their hours of practice, or dying. And at our current rate, we can expect only a small percentage of these new recruits to choose family medicine.

6 The primary care system is showing its cracks. Ten years ago, 2,030 of BC’s family doctors (about half of the GP population) were providing obstetrical care. Today just 945 are performing this invaluable service. Although delivering babies is a “good news” area of medicine, the hours are long, malpractice insurance premiums are high and the remuneration for bringing new life into the world is modest. The result is that obstetrics is too much for many family physicians to contend with today. Comprehensive family practices see an increasing number of patients, many of whom have an expanding number of complex health problems. In addition, many more patients than in the past are in a “holding pattern” with conditions that are being monitored by their family doctor while they wait for specialist appointments and care.

7 It’s no surprise, then, that many of BC’s family doctors are no longer taking on new patients. In 1999, there were 1,420 family doctors accepting new patients – in 2004 that number declined to 599, a drop of 58%.

8 The foundation of primary care needs to be strengthened in order for it to be sustained. The Working Agreement between the doctors and government, ratified in July, 2004, by our membership of 8,000, includes a series of primary care renewal projects designed to make family practice more attractive to medical graduates, improve upon working conditions, and entice family doctors from outside BC to hang up their shingles here. Yet still more needs to be done.

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