With med school enrolment growing, MDs' teaching time jumps by 31%

by Patrick Sullivan

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In the last 15 years, enrolment in Canada's medical schools has risen by close to 80%. However, grateful patients aren't the only ones feeling the impact.

Newly analyzed data indicate that Canadian physicians are now involved in teaching to an unprecedented degree, and that this trend is likely to continue.

"Much more of the training new physicians receive is being offered in community settings and away from traditional academic health science centres," says Lynda Buske, manager of the CMA's Canadian Collaborative Centre for Physician Resources (C3PR). "We are seeing new satellite campuses across the country and literally hundreds of clinical teaching sites, and all of them need teachers. The result is that community-based physicians in all parts of the country are now involved in teaching to an unprecedented degree."

Buske says the proof can be found in data from the 2004, 2007 and 2010 National Physician Survey (NPS), which reveal a 31% jump - from 5.1 hours to 6.7 hours - in the amount of time physicians spend providing direct patient care that had a teaching component. During the same period, teaching without a direct patient-care component, such as lectures and direct contact with medical students and residents, increased by 36%.

"With the trend toward distributed learning and the sheer magnitude of the increase in the number of students and residents needing clinical teachers, no one should be surprised that the NPS shows more physicians spending more time teaching. However, these data are particularly interesting because they show the extent to which medical teaching has evolved in a relatively short time."

The C3PR analysis found that medical and surgical specialists and family physicians are all doing more teaching than ever before. FPs have seen their hours spent providing direct patient care with a teaching component increase by 45%, from 3.1 hours/week in 2004 to 4.5 hours in 2010. The story is similar for other specialists, who have seen an increase of 25%, to 9.1 hours/week, between 2004 and 2010.

The CMA's recent blueprint for health care transformation acknowledged that physicians' teaching duties are expanding and called on governments "to ensure that there is adequate funding of community-based teaching programs for medical students and residents."

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