

Fewer doctors go into primary care

Experts say medical school debt, prestige lead many to choose specialties or surgery

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First published: Tuesday, January 30, 2007

Correction: *Earlier versions of this story incorrectly identified the New York Chapter of the American College of Physicians.*

ALBANY -- We visit primary care doctors for sore throats, checkups, unfamiliar lumps and achy joints. They answer our questions, send us to specialists and care for our overall health.

But the American College of Physicians, the group that represents primary care doctors, says the profession has become so undesirable that medical school graduates are avoiding it.

Though the number of primary care physicians in New York grew by about 1,600 between 2000 and 2004, there is a decreasing number of them in the medical school pipeline.

Only 20 percent of third-year internal medicine residents in the United States planned to pursue careers in general internal medicine in 2005, compared with 54 percent in 1998, according to a report released Monday by the New York Chapter of the American College of Physicians.

"It doesn't bode well," said Dr. Anthony Grieco, president of the chapter.

While the national medical community grapples with an expected shortage of all types of physicians, the organization is particularly concerned about the "gatekeepers," the primary care doctors. The College recommends 50 percent of the physician population be primary care doctors. In reality, the New York and national averages are closer to 30 percent.

Leaders of the College hope that Gov. Eliot Spitzer's ideas for health care reform emphasize primary and preventive care. Spitzer has said he supports the Berger Commission's recommendations to close hospitals, but the commission also urged primary and preventive services get higher insurance reimbursements.

Leaders of the College are eager to see if Spitzer embraces that concept, too.

"If the government wants to save money on Medicaid, then investing in primary care is the way to get there," said Dr. Alwin Steinmann, who directs the internal medicine program at Albany Medical College. The report gathered statistics from several studies to build an argument for cultivating primary care doctors and encouraging more students to enter the field.

The group proposed three recommendations:

Forgive some of the debt of student loans for medical graduates who become primary care doctors.

Give financial grants to doctors in primary care practices so they can improve office technology and hire trained staff to educate patients with chronic conditions.

Appeal to medical schools to make primary care a more prestigious option for medical students.

Grieco said the decreasing number of medical students pursuing primary care medicine is strictly a "a dollars and cents" issue.

The average medical student graduates \$120,000 in debt, vs. \$20,000 in the 1980s. In order to pay back the student loans, he or she will choose a field that pays well.

Primary care physicians are paid 45 percent to 65 percent less than colleagues in medical and surgical specialties, according to the report. Part of the reason is primary care doctors spend much of their workweek returning patients' calls, completing paperwork, talking with insurance companies and other administrative tasks, none of which are reimbursed by insurers, according to the report.

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