



Residents' Page

Where have all the residents gone?

Part 1: Putting the declining family medicine match rates into context

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Interest in family medicine is in decline.^{1,2} This trend has emerged clearly in the literature and the mass media. This article aims not only to assess the situation but to stimulate a discussion of how to encourage medical students and young Canadians to pursue a career in family medicine in this new climate.

Decreasing numbers of Canadian medical school graduates are selecting family medicine in the resident match. The 2005 Canadian Resident Match Service data show that 27.6% of new graduates are choosing family medicine. While this figure increased slightly over the year before, it has slipped steadily from 1992 (44%) to 2002 (29.6%) to the present.¹

Diminishing enthusiasm for family medicine manifests early in medical school. A study by Wright and colleagues at 3 Canadian medical schools showed that only 20% of new medical students were considering family medicine as their first career choice.³ Many factors explain this low level of interest, including medical students' concerns about low prestige, low income, and the breadth of knowledge required for family medicine.⁴ Heavy family physician workloads also contribute to students' avoiding the discipline.

The current family physician shortage will worsen in the coming years as physicians of the baby boomer generation scale back their work hours before retirement. The problem is further compounded by 3 factors: short-sighted government planning, lowering medical school enrolment in the early 1990s and reducing the pool of potential family medicine residents; bureaucratic reluctance to repatriate Canadians studying medicine abroad; and the unwillingness of some new family physicians to work the long hours of their retiring peers, owing to family and lifestyle concerns.

The cost of postgraduate education in Canada has increased rapidly over the last 15 years, outpacing the rate of inflation. Deregulated fees in some provinces, notably Ontario, have dramatically affected medical

education. The national average for medical school fees was \$10 349 in 2005-2006, an increase of 59% from 2000-2001.⁵ Medical school tuition is only part of the financial equation in physician training. Undergraduate tuition fees averaged \$4214 for the 2005-2006 school year, a 22% increase from 2000-2001.⁵ During the same period, however, student financial aid did not increase to the same degree. This has resulted in record levels of student debt and reduced accessibility to medical education for students from middle- and low-income families.

The debt issue is troubling. The 2004 National Physician Survey found that, by completion of medical school, nearly half of Ontario medical students expect debt loads in excess of \$80 000.^{6,7} Family medicine is often less financially rewarding than specialty medicine. In this new climate of overwhelming debt loads, it is difficult to convince students to choose a career that will exacerbate their financial stress.

Indeed, Duffin notes that a financial barrier to medical school now impedes many students well before the application stage.⁸ If you cannot afford an undergraduate degree, how can you contemplate financing 4 more years of medical school? The financial barrier is already affecting medical school demographics. At Ontario medical schools, Kwong and colleagues⁹ found that, as tuition rose from 1997 to 2000, the proportion of medical students from lower-income families decreased. The socioeconomic profile of medical graduates has become increasingly skewed toward the upper echelons and does not reflect the broader Canadian population. Our future physicians could easily have great difficulties in understanding the realities of low-income patients.¹⁰ It does not bode well for family medicine. Medical students from lower socio-

economic backgrounds, if they have somehow overcome the obstacles and made it into medical school, are more likely to select family medicine.¹

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Students rejecting family medicine are often concerned about lower income as practitioners.¹

These concerns are becoming more acute in the current environment of high tuition and heavy debt loads. In this context, renewing enthusiasm for family medicine will be challenging but not impossible. This issue will be addressed in the next article in this 2-part series, which discusses specific strategies to foster more interest in our discipline.

Stay tuned to next month's Residents' Page for, "Where have all the residents gone? Part 2: Renewing interest in family medicine." 

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