New Report Shows Wisconsin is Making Progress on Physician Shortage, but Warns of a Looming Crisis

Madison (August 23, 2016) – Wisconsin has made steady progress to address a projected shortage of physicians in the state, according to a new report by the Wisconsin Council on Medical Education and Workforce (WCMEW). But changes in physician demographics, combined with an aging patient population, suggest much more work is necessary to avoid a future crisis.

WCMEW’s 2016 report, “A Work In Progress: Building Wisconsin’s Future Physician Workforce,” projects a potential shortfall of as many as 4,000 physicians by 2035 and recommends:

- A continued focus on expanding graduate medical education in Wisconsin
- Expansion and improvement of Wisconsin’s education and training infrastructure
- An increased emphasis on recruitment and retention issues
- Continued efforts to encourage care transformation

“Wisconsin has made good progress toward building its future physician workforce,” said WCMEW Executive Director George Quinn. “But that work needs to be redoubled if we are to meet our future workforce challenges.”

Projected Physician Demand and Supply for 2035

The 2016 report projects physician demand increasing 25 percent by the year 2035, dramatically more than Wisconsin’s projected population increase of 12 percent. This is because the over-65 population is projected to increase by 69 percent, and patients over the age of 65, on average, use nearly three times as many physician services as younger patients.

Meanwhile, physician supply is projected to increase by 8 percent, but only if Wisconsin continues to attract, train and retain physicians at the current rate, and if physicians see the same number of patients as they do currently.

A significantly different result occurs if downward trends continue in the number of patients seen by the average physician. If the trend continues, a decrease of 7 percent in full-time equivalent physicians is projected, increasing the shortfall to as much as 4,138 physicians by 2035.
“Changing physician demographics and the increasing complexity of health care delivery and payment is also impacting the clinical output of the average physician,” according to Quinn. “The evolution to data-intensive health care is resulting in higher-quality, higher-value health care, but that comes at a cost in the form of significant new documentation and administrative responsibilities on physicians. As a result, Wisconsin will need a somewhat higher number of physicians per patient to account for decreasing trends in the average physician’s clinical contact hours.”

In 2011, the Wisconsin Hospital Association (WHA) issued a seminal report that projected a shortage of physicians by 2030. The report contained a number of recommendations that were operationalized over the past five years, including:

• Expand graduate medical education (GME) – A new state-funded GME grant program that has funded 11 new or expanded programs in primary care, general surgery and psychiatry with a total of 73 physicians being trained when it is fully implemented.

• Increase medical school enrollment – The Medical College of Wisconsin opened two new campuses, and existing rural/inner city programs were expanded by the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health (UWSMPH).

• Gain a better understanding of the transformations that are occurring in health care – WCMEW sponsored two statewide conferences on team-based care in 2014 and 2015 where over 200 clinicians discussed challenges and opportunities in this innovative care delivery model.

“While it has been gratifying to see the progress we have made in meeting our future physician workforce needs, more needs to be done,” said Chuck Shabino, MD, chief medical officer for the Wisconsin Hospital Association and WCMEW Chair. “Fortunately WCMEW is well positioned to help shape future health care workforce initiatives.”

The report can be found at: wcmew.org.

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The Wisconsin Council on Medical Education is a voluntary collaborative, serving as a venue for dialogue, a public platform to highlight health care workforce issues, and a catalyst for creating workforce policy.

WCMEW is comprised of the following members: Association of Nurse Educators of Wisconsin, Medical College of Wisconsin, Pharmacy Society of Wisconsin, Rural Wisconsin Health Cooperative, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, Wisconsin Academy of Physician Assistants, Wisconsin Hospital Association, Wisconsin Medical Society, and the Wisconsin Nurses Association.