



News Release

Contact: Mary Kay Grasmick, WHA, 608-274-1820 (office) 608-575-7516 (cell)
Steve Busalacchi, Wisconsin Medical Society 800-762-8977 or 576-2274 (cell)
Aaron Conklin, UW Hospital & Clinics 608-263-5561 (office)

Physician Shortage Will Threaten Access to Care Action Now Will Avert Future Crisis

MILWAUKEE/MADISON (March 22, 2004) ----- Patients may be facing longer waits to see a doctor in Wisconsin. How long that wait is might well depend on where you live and the type of physician you are trying to see, according to a new study by the Wisconsin Hospital Association and the Wisconsin Medical Society.

The study entitled "Who Will Care for Our Patients?" reports a current shortage of 506 primary care physicians statewide, which includes a deficit of 72 physicians in the medically underserved areas of Milwaukee County. Specialists are in high demand and are hard to recruit on a statewide basis. General surgeons and radiologists are critically needed in rural areas.

How do these shortages impact Wisconsin citizens? People are increasingly traveling longer distances to seek care, waiting to receive care, or, because of these barriers, not seeking care at all. For other patients, the inability to get an appointment with a physician leads to inappropriate use of emergency departments. And if patients wait too long to see a primary care physician, they become sicker and require even more care, which places additional stress on the patients, their families and the doctor.

Several key factors contribute to the shortage of physicians. Stagnant growth in the physician workforce, combined with a growing – and aging – population means the problem will grow worse with each passing year. Attracting physicians to work in medically underserved areas continues to be a challenge for hospitals and medical clinics.

The Task Force recommends that medical schools recruit students to medical school, as early as in middle school, who are most likely to practice in underserved areas.

"It's essential that we recruit more of our medical students from shortage areas," said Paul Wertsch, MD, president of the Wisconsin Medical Society. "Our future physicians are much more likely to return to underserved areas if they share a common culture," added Wertsch, who practices family medicine in Madison.

--more--

One fact is widely known about physicians: they tend to practice where they do their medical residency. Wisconsin's support of medical residency programs, the training ground for new physicians, suffered major funding cuts when the state all but eliminated its share of support for resident training programs. That concerns Carl Getto, MD, senior vice president of medical affairs at UW Hospital & Clinics.

"The medical education system in Wisconsin is the result of many years of investment, hard work and good planning by state legislators and the people of Wisconsin. Residents play a significant role in providing services that people need—trauma, pediatric, psychiatric and basic medical care," Getto said. "Cuts in the residency program will mean that fewer physicians will be educated and eventually locate in Wisconsin. Abandoning graduate medical education will only hasten the impending crisis."

The Task Force on Wisconsin's Future Physician Workforce identified major initiatives that must occur if Wisconsin is to avert a major crisis:

- Expand the class size of Wisconsin's two medical schools with students who will practice in Wisconsin.
- Develop new models for delivering health care to enhance our physician resources.
- Attract physicians to Wisconsin and keep those who are already here. Wisconsin only retains 38% of the physicians who are trained here.
- Enhance funding for medical education, and focus funding on solving the problems that have been identified.
- Create an advisory council to guide medical education in Wisconsin, while creating a process to maintain data about physician supply and demand.

The biggest obstacle the Task Force faced, according to Chair Leo Brideau, CEO, Columbia-St. Mary's, Milwaukee, was finding clear and consistent data.

"It's hard to solve a problem without having good data on hand. Wisconsin needs a process to monitor and evaluate the supply of physicians with policies and procedures in place to take necessary corrective action," Brideau said. "Anticipating future demand is essential because it takes a decade to educate a physician."

###

Editor's Note: Report available at: <http://www.wha.org/physicianshortage3-04.pdf>
Contact Mary Kay Grasmick for a copy of the full report.
All graphics in the report are available from WHA in an EPS format.
mgrasmick@wha.org or 608-274-1820.