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Patient Care Not a Numbers Game

National health human resources plan badly needed, physician groups say

OTTAWA, Dec. 6, 2012 /CNW/ - Canadian associations representing doctors, residents and medical students agree that Canada needs a better way to anticipate the future supply of physicians. A new national health human resources plan is critical to ensuring that the health care system is able to meet the future needs of Canadians.

The Canadian Medical Association (CMA), the Canadian Association of Internes and Residents (CAIR) and the Canadian Federation of Medical Students (CFMS) see a number of contradictory trends, all of which underscore the need for better planning so that Canada has the right number, mix and distribution of health professionals.

New data indicates that the number of physicians in Canada has increased faster than the size of the population. Yet many communities across the country, particularly those in rural and remote areas, face shortages of family doctors and specialists. In another apparent paradox, many new specialists complete years of training only to face a lack of job opportunities.

"Total numbers of physicians don't tell the whole story," says Dr. Anna Reid, President of the Canadian Medical Association. "Whether we have an adequate supply of doctors depends completely on the demand for their services. We need better plans and strategies to meet changing and growing patient demands."

Fiscal constraints are also inhibiting the hiring of physicians to the point that the prospects for employment are a real concern in some specialties. A recent survey by the CAIR found close to one-third of resident physicians to be less than confident about their job prospects.

**Canadian Federation of Medical Students
Fédération des étudiants et des étudiantes en médecine du Canada**

324 Somerset Street West, Suite 300
Ottawa, ON K2P 0J9 Canada
Tel: 613-565-7740 Fax: 613-288-0524
E-mail: office@cfms.org
Web: www.cfms.org

"We are seeing that residents in some specialties are having employment challenges," said CAIR President Dr. Simon Moore. "Job prospects are a growing concern for residents, but they should also be a concern for policy makers. If we want the right health care providers to match our future needs, we need a national response to health human resources now. Patients depend on access to specialists in their communities."

One of the problems faced by medical students and residents is a lack of information on the job prospects for the various specialties, said Canadian Federation of Medical Students President Robin Clouston.

"This is not only about finding ways to match how we train physicians and where they practise to meet the needs of patients," Clouston said. "It also makes good economic sense to not waste the extensive investment of time and money that go into physician training."

The CMA, CAIR and CFMS are working together to gather and share the most up-to-date data on employment prospects and other information on medical and surgical specialties to ensure that future physicians are able to find work where patients need them most.

Reid noted that getting the right number and mix of doctors, as well as of other health professionals such as nurses and physician assistants, is a complex issue that requires all levels of government, medical schools and national physician organizations to work together. The goal would be to develop a framework that would ensure Canadians have adequate health care services where they need them and that costly, high quality medical training isn't squandered.

"There's no question that the planning work being undertaken by associations representing doctors, residents and medical students must be matched by a commitment from the federal, provincial and territorial governments," Reid said.

For further information:

Lucie Boileau, Senior Advisor, Communications and Public Outreach
Canadian Medical Association
Tel: 800-663-7336 / 613-731-8610 ext. 1266 Cell: 613-447-0866
lucie.boileau@cma.ca

Rita Mezzanotte, Communications Consultant
Canadian Association of Internes and Residents
Tel: 416-271-0667

Miriam Lerner, Vice-President Communications
Canadian Federation of Medical Students
Cell: 778-994-9481
vpcommunications@cfms.org

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Ottawa, ON K2P 0J9 Canada
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