



## Knowledge Synthesis

### Growing the Number of Rural Physicians

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#### INTRODUCTION

*This knowledge synthesis is part of The Monieson Centre's Knowledge Impact in Society (KIS) Project, a three-year endeavour to connect academic knowledge with economic development needs in Eastern Ontario. The synthesis is an accessible presentation of the latest research on issues affecting rural Eastern Ontario. The knowledge synthesis topics were determined through information gathered at 15 community workshops run in partnership with the Eastern Ontario Community Futures Development Corporation Network, Inc. The KIS Project is funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. For more information, visit [www.easternontarioknowledge.ca](http://www.easternontarioknowledge.ca).*

Rural communities in Canada face a shortage of physicians. A recent study has shown that 21% of Canadians live in rural areas, yet only 10% of physicians practice in these areas.<sup>1</sup> This shortage threatens not only the health and well-being of the residents of these communities, but also the communities' potential for economic growth. Having an inadequate number of doctors in a rural community makes it less attractive for new residents to move to the area and for businesses to operate there. Conversely, having high quality health care allows for a rural community to thrive. As such, growing the number of rural physicians should be an important goal for rural community leaders.

#### STRATEGIES TO GROW THE NUMBER OF RURAL PHYSICIANS

To effectively grow the number of rural physicians, a multi-pronged approach which considers both short-term and long-term strategies should be taken. In addition, strategies to increase the number of rural physicians should be targeted at a number of different individuals. These are: practicing physicians from outside the rural community, spouses and families of these physicians, medical students, and youth from rural areas. In the following sections, this knowledge synthesis will describe strategies that leaders of rural areas can take to increase the number of rural physicians.

##### *Engage in Recruitment Initiatives*

Leaders of rural areas can engage in recruitment initiatives to recruit physicians to their community. Some communities have local recruitment committees and programs in place to do this whereas others might have human resource departments. In addition, a growing trend in Canada is for communities to hire a "community recruiter" whose job it is to recruit physicians on a full-time basis.<sup>23</sup> Community

<sup>1</sup> J. Rourke, "Increasing the Number of Rural Physicians," *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 17 (2008): 322-325.

<sup>2</sup> *Successful Recruitment Initiatives: A Community Success Story*, Guelph: The Ontario Rural Council, <http://www.ruralhealth.ca/Community%20Success%20Stories/LeedsGrenville.pdf>.

recruiters are creative in the methods they use to recruit physicians. It is important to note that these methods are not exclusive to recruiters and can also be used by communities who do not have the financial resources to hire a recruiter. The following are a number of activities and practices to consider when designing recruitment initiatives:

- **Use job fairs and workshops:** Potential recruits can be found at job fairs and workshops. It is worthwhile to take part in these events to look for and establish relationships with potential recruits (i.e. physicians, medical students).
- **Introduce recruits to your region:** Potential recruits often need an advance introduction to a rural area before they will consider practicing there. Tours and recruitment events are effective ways of “selling” a community. Consider the following when organizing such events:
  - The events should highlight the attractions of the community and the general benefits of living in a rural community. These benefits may include a sense of warmth and community, a lack of traffic, and more outdoor activities.
  - Questions that concern the personal needs of potential recruits and their families should be addressed if possible (i.e. the employment needs of the spouse, the educational needs of the children). Potential recruits should also be given information about what housing is available in the rural area.
  - Potential recruits want to know who they may be working with. One way of doing this is for practicing physicians in the rural area to be invited to these events. Physicians are more likely to move to a rural area if they know and get along with the other practicing physicians in the community.
  - Potential recruits will be impressed if recruiters know as much as they can about them before a tour or visit. Recruiters can do this by talking with recruits on the phone to get to know them and their family. This way, recruiters can anticipate and prepare for questions that recruits may have during a visit.
- **Develop professional promotional materials:** Potential recruits may become interested in and learn about a rural community by reading promotional materials. It is important for these materials (i.e. brochures, websites) to be up-to-date, comprehensive, and professionally designed.
- **Foster word-of-mouth with your existing physicians:** Potential recruits can become interested in a career in a rural area by word-of-mouth from other physicians working in the area.<sup>4</sup> As much as possible, recruiters and community leaders should try to forge relationships with physicians currently practicing in rural areas. These physicians should be encouraged to promote working in a rural area to their colleagues in urban areas. Rural physicians are community ambassadors and can convincingly highlight the benefits of working in a rural community.
- **Pursue local talent:** Medical students who are born and raised in rural communities are more likely to return to practice in a rural area. Recruiters should therefore try to establish

<sup>3</sup> W. Glauser, “Recruiters Using Whatever Means Necessary,” *Medical Post* 42 (2006): 1-4.

<sup>4</sup> G. Hunter, “Recruitment and Retention of Medical Doctors.” Kingston: The Monieson Centre, 2008, <http://www.easternontarioknowledge.ca/dmdocuments/gordon%20hunter%20report%20april%202008.pdf>.

relationships with these students when they are away from their home communities during their medical training. By keeping in touch, recruiters have the opportunity to convince these students to return to their home communities.

### *Create Financial Incentives*

In the short-term, research has shown that financial incentives can help to attract physicians to rural areas. It is worthwhile to note, however, that the long-term efficacy of financial incentives has been found to be quite limited.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, financial incentives are typically the main attraction of many physician recruitment programs. Such incentives include guaranteed minimum income contracts, isolation allowances, loan forgiveness, assistance with practice expenses, scholarships and bursaries for medical students, and signing bonuses.<sup>6</sup>

Examples of financial incentive programs include a program in British Columbia in which physicians were offered a \$10,000 signing bonus to practice in underserved areas. In addition, Ontario's Free Tuition Program provides up to \$40,000 to final-year medical students, residents, and recently graduated physicians in exchange for a return-of-service commitment. Also, in Eastern Ontario, the City of Quinte West has a physician recruitment program which offers \$100,000 over five years to doctors who set up their practice in the Quinte West Medical Centre.<sup>7</sup> For more information on other physician recruitment programs in Eastern Ontario, refer to Appendix A.

When developing a funding model for physicians, several things should be taken into consideration to increase the attractiveness of the incentives:

- Financial incentives should provide security and flexibility for the physician that recognizes the physician as an important community resource.
- Offering a higher degree of financial incentive may be appropriate if a physician is required to take on a higher level of clinical responsibility. This is often the case for rural physicians as they are frequently required to perform a greater number of procedures than their urban counterparts.
- Funding could be allocated for continuing medical education, such as attending conferences or taking courses. For example, part of Alberta's successful Rural Physician's Action Plan consisted of an Enrichment Program that allocated funds for physicians to upgrade existing skills to meet the needs of rural communities.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> I.P. Sempowski, "Effectiveness of Financial Incentives in Exchange for Rural and Underserved Area Return-of-service Commitments: Systematic Review of the Literature, *Canadian Journal of Rural Medicine* 9 (2004): 82-88.

<sup>6</sup> S. Laurent, *Rural Canada: Access to Health Care*, Ottawa: Library of Parliament, Parliamentary Research Branch, 2002, <http://dsp-psd.pwgsc.gc.ca/Collection-R/LoPBdP/BP/prb0245-e.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.city.quintewest.on.ca/doctor\\_recruitment.htm](http://www.city.quintewest.on.ca/doctor_recruitment.htm)

<sup>8</sup> R.W. Wilson, S.C. Woodhead-Lyons, D.G. Moores, "Alberta's Rural Physician Action Plan: An Integrated Approach to Education, Recruitment and Retention." *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 15 (1998); 351-355.

- Last, a funding model should consider a physician's personal needs such as support for a physician's spouses and families.<sup>9</sup>

### *Engage in Community Development*

A longer-term strategy that can be used to grow the number of new physicians in a rural community is for community leaders to engage in activities that make the community more attractive to potential recruits. Rural community leaders can work in partnership with other community stakeholders (i.e. local residents, various organizations, physicians, and administrators of health care facilities) to design and implement improvements in the community that may help to meet a potential physician's professional and personal needs. While such community improvements will not occur overnight, they will certainly increase the chances of attracting physicians to the area in the long run. Several issues and questions to consider are the following:

- What is the state of the healthcare facilities in the area?
- Is there an opportunity for group practice in the community?
- Are there adequate recreation options in the community?
- What initiatives are in place to help integrate physicians and their families into the community?
- What kinds of employment opportunities are there for spouses of potential physicians?
- What kinds of educational opportunities are there for children of potential physicians?
- What kinds of efforts are being made to develop grant proposals to bring additional resources to the community?

### *Expose Medical Students to the Rural Practice*

Medical students (future physicians) are more likely to become interested in eventually practicing in a rural community if they have had some exposure to the area. Exposure allows medical students to gain an appreciation for the attractions of the community and to better understand what rural practice might be like. Accordingly, community leaders would benefit from establishing connections with medical school administrators to encourage an increase in the number of rural rotations that are offered to medical students. Finally, community leaders can also encourage existing rural physicians to be educators in medical programs. As teachers, these rural physicians are role models and can positively influence students' attitudes towards rural practice.<sup>10</sup>

### *Get Rural Youth Interested in Medicine*

As stated above, individuals who are born and raised in rural communities are more likely to stay in the community or return to the community in the long run. Thus, a long-term strategy a community can use to grow their number of physicians is to encourage rural youth to become interested in medicine. One innovative initiative that has been doing this is MedQUEST, a week-long summer camp that gives high school students from rural areas a taste of a career in health care. Over the course of the week, students

<sup>9</sup> "Recruitment and Retention of Doctors in Rural Practice," World Organization of Family Doctors, [http://www.globalfamilydoctor.com/aboutWonca/working\\_groups/rural\\_training/practice/Practi07.htm](http://www.globalfamilydoctor.com/aboutWonca/working_groups/rural_training/practice/Practi07.htm) (Accessed Feb. 2, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> "Increasing the Number of Rural Physicians."

learn to deliver robotic babies, read x-rays, splint and cast fractures, perform simple sutures, give injections and learn what it takes to become a physician.<sup>11</sup> Early exposure to the practice of medicine can influence the career plans of youth and increase their chances of gaining acceptance into medical schools. MedQUEST is an educational initiative that can be viewed as a model that other communities can use to get rural youth interested in medicine. On a smaller scale, community leaders could also organize healthcare-related career fairs and get healthcare professionals to make classroom presentations for high school students in rural communities.

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<sup>11</sup> "MedQUEST," HealthKick, <http://www.healthkickhuron.ca/medquest.html> (Accessed Feb. 2, 2009).

## APPENDIX A – ONLINE RESOURCES

### 1. HealthKick Huron

<http://www.healthkickhuron.ca>

This webpage describes HealthKick Huron which is an initiative that takes a multi-pronged approach to address the shortage of healthcare human resources. The project is based in Seaforth, Huron County, and co-located with the Huron Community Health Team and the Gateway Rural Research Institute. HealthKick Huron has won numerous awards for being an innovation in health human resources.

### 2. Recruitment and Retention of Medical Doctors – Research Report

<http://www.easternontarioknowledge.ca>

This research report identifies aspects related to the recruitment and retention of physicians in Canada. The report was prepared for The Monieson Centre at the Queen's School of Business by Dr. Gordon Hunter. In particular, this report focuses on identifying what motivates medical practitioners. These motivation aspects were investigated from the perspective of various audiences.

### 3. Rural Canada: Access to Health Care – Research Report

<http://dsp-psd.pwgsc.gc.ca/Collection-R/LoPBdP/BP/prb0245-e.htm>

This research report presents the issues and challenges of health care in rural Canada and examines the role, both existing and potential, of the federal government in this area. This research report was prepared by Stephen Hunter in the Economics Division of the Federal Government. Contained in this report are strategies for the recruitment and retention of physicians in rural areas.

### 4. Recruiting New Rural Practitioners – Research Report

<http://www.unmc.edu/Community/ruralmeded/fedstloc/RecrRet/recrnat.htm>

This report was prepared for the University of Nebraska Medical Centre by Dr. Robert Bowman. It discusses practical ways that communities can increase their chances to recruit new rural practitioners.

### 5. MedQUEST

**At Memorial University:**

<http://www.med.mun.ca/StudentAffairs/Med-Quest.aspx>

**At the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry:**

<http://www.cdswomen.ca/medquest.php>

MedQUEST is a summer program for students in grades 10-12. It is a career-oriented program, specially designed for students from rural areas. During each MedQUEST session, students are introduced to many health professions such as medicine, nursing, pharmacy, occupational therapy, and physiotherapy. These health careers and special topics will be presented through lectures, demonstrations, experiments, guest speakers, research projects, job shadowing, role playing, small group sessions, and tours of health facilities.

**6. Information on Physician Recruitment/Retention programs in Eastern Ontario****City of Belleville – Family Physician Recruitment and Retention Program**

<http://www.city.belleville.on.ca/portal/bvcityhall/doctorrecruitment>

**City of Peterborough – Physician Recruitment**

<http://www.docfinder.ca>

**City of Quinte West Doctor Recruitment Program**

[http://www.city.quintewest.on.ca/doctor\\_recruitment.htm](http://www.city.quintewest.on.ca/doctor_recruitment.htm)

**Hastings County – Family Physician Recruitment Program (PDF)**

[http://www.hastingscounty.com/files/%7BD3FABBD3-A08B-4A82-823E-C284325E1E23%7DPhysician\\_Brochure.pdf](http://www.hastingscounty.com/files/%7BD3FABBD3-A08B-4A82-823E-C284325E1E23%7DPhysician_Brochure.pdf)

**Leeds-South Grenville Physician Recruitment Program (PDF)**

<http://www.ruralhealth.ca/Community%20Success%20Stories/LeedsGrenville.pdf>

**Renfrew County Physician Recruitment**

[http://www.renfrewisparadise.ca/renfrew\\_victoria\\_hospital.htm](http://www.renfrewisparadise.ca/renfrew_victoria_hospital.htm)

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