

Background: The U.S. Physician Shortage

A shortage of physicians in certain specialties and certain geographical areas is growing across the United States. Most healthcare industry trend-watchers now agree that the situation probably will get worse over the next couple of decades. A statistical snapshot:

- U.S. medical schools have trained an average of 15,500 physicians a year since 1980, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Meanwhile, the population continues to grow. U.S. Census data shows a 33-percent population increase since 1980, from more than 228 million people in 1980 to almost 303 million people in 2007.
- Richard Cooper, MD, director of the Health Policy Institute at the Medical College of Wisconsin in Milwaukee and a national expert on physician-workforce issues, projects a shortage of 50,000 physicians by 2010. Cooper says the shortage could grow to as many as 200,000 physicians by 2020.
- In a June 2006 report the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC), a group representing the 125 accredited U.S. medical schools, called for, among other things, a 30% increase in accredited medical school enrollment by 2015 (double the percentage AAMC called for a year earlier) and elimination of the current Medicare restriction on the number of funded residency positions so that graduate medical education programs can accommodate more graduates of accredited U.S. medical schools.
- In an October 2006 report entitled “Physician Supply and Demand: Projections to 2020,” the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration projected a shortfall of 55,100 physicians in 2020, primarily among non-primary-care specialties.
- In August 2007 the AAMC updated its comprehensive overview, “Recent Studies and Reports on Physician Shortages in the U.S.” That document is available here: <http://www.aamc.org/workforce/recentworkforcestudies2007.pdf>

The physician shortage is more acute in Rural America. Consider these statistics from the National Rural Health Association (NRHA) and the federal Office of Rural Health Policy:

- Roughly 25 percent of the U.S. population lives in Rural America, but only 10 percent of U.S. physicians practice there.
- There are 2,157 Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSA's) in rural and frontier areas of all states and US territories compared to 910 in urban areas.
- Twenty percent (20%) of non-metropolitan counties lack mental health services versus five percent (5%) of metropolitan counties.
- In 1999, 87 percent of the 1,669 Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas in the United States were in non-metropolitan counties and home to more than 30 million people.

Meanwhile, the U.S. population is aging. According to government sources:

- Today there are more than 37 million people age 65 and over, and that number is expected to rise to more than 70 million by 2030. [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System— United States, 2005* (online). (2006). National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (producer). Available from <http://apps.nccd.cdc.gov/brfss/index.asp>]
- The 2000 U.S. Census indicated the age-60-plus population will have quadrupled by 2010.

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that the population 75 age years and older will exceed the population 65 to 74 years old by 2040.
- According to the CDC report "*Health, United States, 2004*," about 12%, or 1 in 8 Americans, will be age 75 or older by the year 2050.
- People are living longer: In 1900, life expectancy was approximately 47 years. Americans born in 2007 can expect to live, on average, to age 78.

And demand for medical services is increasing.

- The rate of doctor visits begins increasing noticeably at age 45: Americans ages 45 to 64 averaged 3.5 visits per year, while those between ages 65 and 75 averaged 5.5 visits per year in 1997.
- Older Americans use medical services at a considerably higher rate than younger people. Americans age 75 and older averaged almost three times the number of medical office visits per year (6.5) than those ages 25 to 44 (2.4) in 1997, according to the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics.
- Baby boomers are now entering the 55 to 64 age group, where inpatient days per thousand increase 58% over the 45 to 54 age group, and 121% over the 35 to 44 age group. (PriceWaterhouse Coopers' ["Cost of Caring" study](#), February 19, 2003, prepared for American Hospital Association.)
- A 2003 study published in the *Annals of Surgery* predicted a 14-percent increase in surgery volume by 2010 and a 47-percent increase by 2020.
- Imaging technology unimaginable even a decade ago is facilitating earlier detection and uncovering new disorders or irregularities that, more and more often, can be treated by an expanding array of specialists and sub-specialists—many already in short supply.