

# Why Is There a Shortage of Primary Care Doctors?



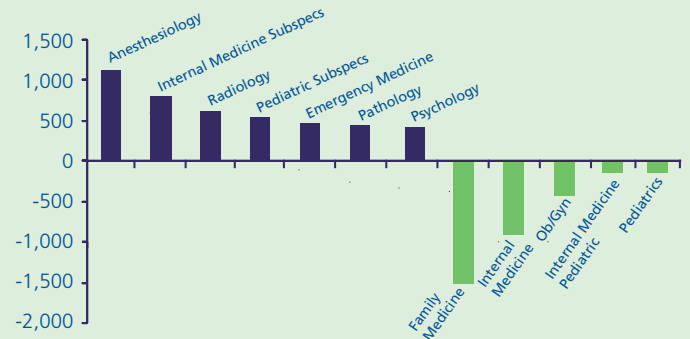
The nation is facing an overall shortage of physicians, and it's expected to get worse. Of particular concern to many is a growing deficit of primary care doctors.

The ramifications of this trend are disconcerting. While the entire nation would be affected by a primary care physician shortage, the impact is expected to be greater in areas that are already underserved. In addition, inferior health outcomes associated with inadequate access to primary care—including higher mortality from heart disease and cancer—are projected to become even more evident among already vulnerable populations.

## Reasons for Primary Care Shortage Are Multifold

- **Interest in a career in primary care has declined in recent years.** The number of U.S. medical school graduates selecting a family medicine career has fallen from 5,746 in 2002 to 4,210 in 2007 (almost 27%).<sup>1</sup> This contrasts with increased interest in generalist careers in the early 1990s, due largely to an anticipated emphasis on managed care. However, over the past 30 years, primary care doctors have consistently made up about one-third of all physicians.<sup>2</sup>
- **Medical education and training appear to have less impact on the career choice of new doctors than the practice environment for primary care.** Medical students often cite factors such as an ability to control workload, flexibility in scheduling, and career satisfaction as elements in their decisions.
- **Public and private reimbursement systems undervalue primary care services in comparison to procedures performed by specialists.** Consequently, there is a significant income gap—and perception of status and prestige—between generalists and specialists.
- **The problem will grow worse as the U.S. population increases and ages.** As people age, they are more likely to develop multiple and complex chronic conditions—and the number of people over age 65 is expected to double between 2000 and 2030. It therefore becomes imperative to have an increasing supply of primary care physicians who are trained in managing these conditions together and able to work in concert with other health care professionals. At the same time, almost one in three physicians is over age 55 and likely to retire within the next two decades. A large percentage of them are primary care doctors.

## Fewer U.S. MDs Are Choosing Primary Care



Number of U.S. MDs choosing various medical specialties, including primary care disciplines (family medicine, internal medicine, etc.), 2002-07.

AAMC/AMA National GME Census, JAMA Vol. 300(10), 2008.

## Addressing the Problem

The AAMC and our member medical schools and teaching hospitals are committed to creating an environment where primary care delivery and training can flourish. We support:

- **Developing new, efficient care models**, such as the “medical home,” a new system of care delivery that encourages reliance on a coordinated team of professionals
- **Supporting appropriate payment policies** that fairly value the cost and effort of providing primary care
- **Promoting appropriate graduate medical education reimbursement policies** that encourage residency training in non-hospital settings
- **Doubling the number of National Health Service Corps awards** to help more new physicians practice primary care
- **Encouraging the operation of regional medical school campuses** to determine whether community-based training correlates with an increase in the number of new physicians choosing primary care.

<sup>1</sup> AAMC/AMA National GME Census, JAMA Vol. 300(10), 2008.

<sup>2</sup> American Medical Association. Physician Characteristics and Distribution in the US. 2006.

## Key Points on the Shortage of Primary Care Doctors

- The overall shortage of physicians is expected to worsen. Of particular concern to many is a growing deficit of primary care doctors.
- The most vulnerable populations—those who are already underserved—are expected to be most hurt by these shortages.
- Interest in a career in primary care has declined in recent years.
- Medical education and training appear to have less impact on physician career choice than other factors.
- Public and private reimbursement systems undervalue primary care services in comparison to procedures performed by specialists.
- The problem will grow worse as the U.S. population increases and ages.