



Everything Michigan

Is there a doctor in the state

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Paul Farr hopes the steel structure slowly rising at Interstate 196 and Division Avenue in downtown Grand Rapids represents the beginning of something even bigger.

If it doesn't, finding a doctor in this state is going to become an increasingly difficult task in the next decade or so.

So acute is the projected physician shortage that Farr is downright thrilled to see Michigan State University progressing on plans for a Grand Rapids medical school as well as plans for a new medical school in Oakland County. The added graduates resulting from the projects can help to mitigate the looming decline.

"We wish we could double the pipeline and start graduating them tomorrow," said Farr, a Grand Rapids gastroenterologist and immediate past president of the Michigan State Medical Society.

"This needs to keep going," Farr said.

And it may.

In addition to the MSU College of Human Medicine's expansion into Grand Rapids and the recently announced medical school between Oakland University and Beaumont Hospitals that's targeted to open in 2010, Central Michigan University is now weighing formation of a medical school, and a new initiative in Detroit will examine the potential for growing medical education and research.

In each case, economic development through related medical research and commercialization of innovations, plus addressing a coming physician shortage, are the driving motivators.

"This is something that will benefit all of Michigan if we get a lot of these medical schools going," said Farr, who claims difficulty in recruiting physicians to his practice.

Two reports in the last two years detail the scope of the problem.

The state medical society issued a report in June 2005 that pointed to a deficit of 6,000 physicians in the state by 2020, as baby boomers retire from the profession and an aging population drives up demand.

A subsequent February 2006 report from a blue-ribbon panel assembled by several health care organizations foresees a shortage of more than 4,500 doctors within the next 15 years -- about 12 percent fewer than the projected need.

With about 30,000 active physicians at present, the state will experience a shortfall of 900 doctors by 2010, 2,400 by 2015, and 4,500 by 2020.

Declines could become more acute in certain medical specialties and in rural areas of the state.

The additional capacity each project would generate surely would help ease to some extent the chronic shortage, though probably not soon enough. Given the several years it takes to get through school, then

serve medical internships and residencies, the clock is quickly ticking if the state is to mitigate the projected deficit.

But even with greater capacity to educate more new doctors, more focus is needed on keeping graduates in Michigan, or at least not causing them to look elsewhere, doctors say.

The underfunding of Medicaid, the reimbursement rates for physician services and the uninsured population are just a few of the issues that can steer medical school graduates away from Michigan, said John MacKeigan, a retired colorectal surgeon and the vice president of medical affairs at Michigan Medical PC in Grand Rapids.

Those issues alone are going to require a serious public-policy debate on health care and medical education, MacKeigan said.

MMPC, the largest physician-owned medical group in the state, already is experiencing the doctor shortage, with fewer applicants for openings and long periods to fill vacancies, he said.

"The medical profession has been screaming about this for 15 years, and now it's becoming evident to people. The whole country needs to take a serious look at our needs when it comes to physicians," MacKeigan said. "I don't know what level of crisis needs to happen before we make a substantial change of philosophy."

Backers of MSU's plans expect a good number of the medical students who train in Grand Rapids to remain in the region, particularly with the allure of the massive research and clinical buildup presently ongoing.

College of Human Medicine Dean Marsha Rappley told an Alliance for Health gathering late last year that 60 percent of MSU graduates come back to practice in Michigan.

"Where you train doctors has a great deal to do on where they end up," added Jeff Dwyer, MSU's associate dean of research.

Medical schools nationwide are moving to increase enrollments, according to the American Association of Medical Schools.

The association expects enrollment to grow 17 percent between 2002 and 2012.

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