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Will Older Physicians Opt Out of Patient Care? New Survey Sounds Warning

By Kurt Mosley

What would happen if physicians age 50 or older suddenly decided to turn in their stethoscopes?

Given the sheer number of physicians in this age cohort, the results would be disturbing, to say the least. According to the AMA, 47 percent of all doctors in the U.S. – some 387,160 physicians – are 50 or above. Of the 14,857 physicians in Georgia who are active in patient care, 5,928 (40%) are over 50. Clearly, any exodus of older physicians from medicine would incapacitate our current health-care delivery system, both nationally and in the Badger State.

While no such immediate exodus is anticipated, the aging of the physician population is cause for concern. Merritt, Hawkins & Associates tracks the concerns and career plans of older physicians through our Survey of Physicians 50 to 65 Years Old. The 2007 Survey was recently released and reveals some interesting findings.

Fourteen percent of the 1,175 physicians we surveyed plan to retire in the next one to three years. Another seven percent plan to find a medical job in a non-clinical setting, while three percent plan to find a job in a non-medical setting. In all, about one-quarter of doctors surveyed said they plan to opt out of patient care sometime in the next one to three years. In addition, 12 percent said they plan to work part-time (20 hours a week or less), eight percent plan to significantly reduce their work load and four percent plan to work locum tenens.

People do not always do what they say they will in surveys. Nevertheless, these numbers are sobering. Should only ten percent of older physicians retire or opt out of patient care in the next one to three years, tens of thousands of doctors would be removed from the national physician work force, and Georgia could stand to lose close to 1,000 physicians. Should an additional ten percent choose



to work part-time or slow-down significantly in the next one to three years, many additional FTEs would be lost. At that point, the number of exits from medicine would exceed the number of entrants.

Given that the U.S. already is experiencing a physician shortage in many areas, a significant reduction in the number of older physicians in the near future would be particularly inopportune. Consider that virtually all of the major presidential candidates support health policies that would extend healthcare access to millions of people who lack such access now. The enhanced demand for medical services would tax the current physician workforce, and very likely would overburden a workforce diminished by retirement and other forms of attrition.

Though this fact often seems to fly under the radar, health policies must be implemented by people, and any policy that expands access without also expanding the supply of physicians, nurses and other health professionals will most likely fall short of expectations. By extension, any plan to causes a significant number of older doctors to walk away from patient career also will be unlikely to succeed.

A copy of Merritt, Hawkins & Associates' 2007 Survey of Physicians 50 to 65 Years Old is available at www.merritt-hawkins.com or you may call Mr. Mosley at (800) 876-0500.

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