

Tracking practise entry cohorts of Canadian post-MD education programs

By Lynda Buske, Director, Workforce Research, Canadian Medical Association and Steve Slade, VP Research and Analysis, CAPER-ORIS, AFMC

Many Canadian medical graduates live and work abroad. In 2006, 8,162 Canadian-educated physicians provided direct patient care in the United States¹. Based on statistics from the Canadian Medical Association (CMA), that figure is equal to 13% of all physicians in Canada and 17% of Canadian medical graduates in Canada in 2006. Even without including other regions, like the UK, Europe, Australia and Asia, the percentage of Canadian medical graduates living outside of Canada begs consideration.

Figure 1 presents data on the percentages of physicians located in Canada after they complete postgraduate residency training in Canada. The figure shows that, with the exception of the 1995 cohort, the 1990 to 1996 cohorts exhibited a general pattern of decreasing retention in Canada, 2, 5 and 10 years after completion of postgraduate training. On average, 91%, 90% and 88% of these cohorts were located in Canada 2, 5 and 10 years after completion of post-MD training, respectively. The 1994 cohort had the lowest retention rate, at both the five year (86.7%) and 10 year mark (85.8%).

The physician retention trend was generally upward during the latter half of the 1990s. Retention at 2 years reached a low of 88.3% among the 1995 cohort. In comparison, 93.8% of the 2000 cohort was located in Canada in 2002. Retention at 5 years has also seen improvements. As noted, 86.7% of the 1994 cohort was located in Canada 5 years into practice. This is compared to 92.2% of the 2001 cohort.

Notwithstanding year-to-year variations and other cyclical patterns, Canada clearly experienced an increasing loss of graduating medical residents during the early to mid 1990s, a trend that appears to have abated.

If Canada has turned the tide on out-migration, questions remain as to what factors drive physician migration trends. It may be that retention rates among graduating medical residents are related to the more general migration patterns among practising physicians. For instance, 1994 saw the highest out-migration among all practising physicians. Perhaps not coincidentally, this year exactly coincides with the practice entry cohort that recorded the lowest 2 and 5 year retention rates.

A variety of other contextual factors may motivate physicians, and graduating medical residents alike, to look at practice outside of Canada. Income caps, clawbacks and mobility restrictions may have prompted out-migration during the 1990s. In contrast, alternative payment plans, recruitment strategies and other incentives may be fuelling higher physician retention rates in recent years. The U.S. Council on Graduate Medical Education is predicting physician shortages of 90,000 or more by 2020 in the United States. Coupled with the new administration's vision of an improved health care system, it comes as no surprise that Canadian physicians are seeing increased activity by U.S. recruiters. Time will tell if these forces reverse the gains we've made in retaining Canada's physicians.

1 Phillips Jr RL, Petterson S, Fryer Jr GE, Rosser W. The Canadian contribution to the US physician workforce. *Can Med Assoc J*, Apr 2007; 176: 1083 - 1087.

Figure 1: Percent of Physicians Located in Canada 2, 5 and 10 Years After Completion of Postgraduate Medical Education, Practice Entry Cohorts From 1990-2005

