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NPS Identifies Urgent Need for a Canadian Physician Workforce Strategy

Sustainable Physician Workforce Required to Meet Needs of Aging Canadian Population

(January 9, 2008, Ottawa, ON) – Data released today from the 2007 National Physician Survey (NPS) highlight the need for governments to address the issues undermining patients' access to health care services, particularly the impact of health workforce shortages on timely access to care.

The NPS is Canada's largest census survey of physicians and physicians-in-training. It is conducted jointly by The College of Family Physicians of Canada (CFPC), the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) and The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada (RCPSC). The data provide meaningful information on attitudes among the country's present and future doctors toward a wide range of critical issues. When compared with the 2004 survey, the 2007 NPS provides an in-depth look at how physicians work, the impediments they face in providing care to their patients, and the factors that are shaping the future educational and career intentions of medical students and residents.

Survey results confirm that timely access to health care remains a serious challenge for Canadians. "Despite government investments to achieve reduced wait times in priority areas such as cancer treatment, heart procedures, diagnostic imaging, joint replacements, and sight restoration, the survey reveals that progress has been quite uneven." says Dr. Louise Samson, President of The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada. "Physicians also reported that access in other key areas such as emergency services and hospital in-patient care on an urgent basis is poor. Ratings for these services have worsened since 2004 when the NPS was first conducted."

NPS 2007 indicates that 75% of physicians are generally satisfied with their professional lives yet remain frustrated by barriers to their providing patient care, such as system funding, availability of personnel, paperwork and bureaucracy. Increasing complexity of patient caseloads (80%); management of patients with chronic diseases/conditions (73%); increasing patient expectations (70%); and the aging population (69% among all physicians, 80% among family physicians) were cited as key factors increasing the demand for physicians' time.

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“Despite the challenges in health care revealed by the survey results, over 80 per cent (84%) of physicians confirmed they are either somewhat or very satisfied with their relationships with patients,” states Dr. Ruth Wilson, President of The College of Family Physicians of Canada. “More physicians are working collaboratively in formal and informal practice arrangements and using technology effectively in an effort to improve the care of their patients.”

Ninety-three per cent of physicians who are involved in inter-professional care state that these working relationships improve the care their patients receive. Similarly, more doctors (26%) are now using electronic records to enter and retrieve clinical patient notes. Seventeen per cent maintain practice websites and many are taking advantage of electronic communications to more effectively consult with and about their patients.

The NPS 2007 also identifies significant changing patterns of physician practice. The baby boom generation is starting to retire, which equates to over 4,000 physicians who plan to stop practicing over the next two years. Of new physicians under 35 years of age replacing the baby boomers, 55% are female. And typically, young doctors – male and female – are seeking a different balance in their work and personal lives than previous generations.

“Changing practice patterns are affecting physician resources, and this needs to be factored into future health care resource planning,” says CMA President, Dr. Brian Day. “The new NPS data is a valuable resource to governments and health authorities in the development of strategies to address the education, training, recruitment and retention of physicians to best meet the health care needs of Canadians.”

For more information and to see the NPS 2004 data and highlights of the NPS 2007 results, please go to www.nationalphysiciansurvey.ca

In the months to come, more NPS research will be released according to provincial/territorial and specialist physician analysis as well as medical resident and medical student results.

The NPS has been made possible through the financial contributions of the Canadian Medical Association, The College of Family Physicians of Canada, The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, the Canadian Institute for Health Information, and Health Canada.

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