

**August 2005**

Family Physicians Accepting New Patients: Comparison of 2001 Janus Survey and 2004 National Physician Survey Results

CIHI Physician Databases

2005:2

Introduction

Family physicians serve as a significant resource to Canadians when they turn to the primary health care system. Statistics Canada's Canadian Community Health Survey reports that, in 2003, 86.3% of Canadians had a regular family physician.¹ In the same year, 15.8% of Canadians reported experiencing difficulty accessing routine or on-going care when they were in need of it.¹

Difficulties in acquiring primary health care services are also reported through survey results published by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario (CPSO) and Alberta's Capital Region Medical Staff Association (CRMSA). The CPSO recently reported that the proportion of Ontario family physicians accepting new patients has dropped from 38.4% in 2000 to 16.5% in 2004.² The CRMSA has identified a similar trend in the Edmonton area, reporting that the proportion of family physicians accepting new patients went from 83% in 1997 to 69% in 2000.³

According to a recent report published by CIHI on the supply, distribution and migration of Canadian physicians, the number of family physicians per 100,000 population increased from 94 in 2000 to 98 in 2004.⁴ This demonstrates that there are factors other than the supply of family physicians that impact on access to primary care services, such as physician's hours of work, scope of services, and population health needs. More research is needed to identify and better understand the inter-relationship among these factors.

Analysis in Brief

Taking health information further

This *Analysis in Brief* presents data on the proportions of family physicians who report that they are accepting new patients into their practices. The results offer a pan-Canadian perspective based on physician surveys carried out in 2001 and 2004. It also looks at variations in the proportions of family physicians accepting new patients in urban and rural areas.

Data Sources

2001 Janus Survey Database: The Janus Survey Database contains information provided by the 13,088 eligible physicians who replied to the 2001 National Family Physician Workforce Survey. All family/general practitioners in Canada were contacted through the 2001 Janus Survey. This report is based on data for the 13,059 respondents for whom province or territory is known. Detailed Janus Survey information, including study methodologies, questionnaire forms and survey results, is available online at the College of Family Physicians of Canada's Web site (www.cfpc.ca).

2004 National Physician Survey (NPS) Database: The NPS Database contains information provided by the 21,296 eligible physicians who replied to the 2004 National Physician Survey. All family/general practitioners and specialist physicians in Canada were contacted through the 2004 NPS. This report is based on data for the 11,041 family/general practitioners who replied to the 2004 survey. The College of Family Physicians of Canada, Canadian Medical Association and Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada carried out the NPS. Detailed information on the survey, including study methodologies, questionnaire forms, survey results and data request procedures, is published on the NPS's Web site (www.nps-snm.ca).

Provincial/Territorial and Urban/Rural Family Physicians Accepting New Patients in 2001 and 2004

Both the 2001 Janus Survey and the 2004 National Physician Survey asked family physicians if they accepted new patients into their practices either without restriction or conditionally (for example, accepting only relatives of current patients), or if they completely closed their offices to new patients.* Table 1 presents results for family physicians who indicated that they accept new patients, without restrictions.

* In asking family physicians if they were accepting new patients both surveys offered two identical response options. "No restrictions; practice is open to all new patients" and "Completely closed". The two surveys differed with respect to the response options for partially closed practices. The 2004 survey provided a single response option for "Partially closed" practices, whereas the 2001 survey offered a variety of response options (e.g. "Closed, but will accept new referrals from other physicians", "Closed, but will accept friends of current patients").

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The results shown in Table 1 indicate that variations exist across provinces/territories, across urban/rural settings and over time. For instance, in 2004, 39.7% of family physicians in Newfoundland and Labrador reported that they were accepting new patients compared to 20.0% of family physicians in British Columbia. In the same year, 33.7% of Canada's rural family physicians were accepting new patients compared to 18.1% of urban family physicians.

For all of Canada, the proportion of rural family physicians accepting new patients remained virtually unchanged between 2001 and 2004 (33.8% versus 33.7%, respectively). However, during the same period the proportion of urban family physicians accepting new patients went from 21.3% in 2001 to 18.1% in 2004. Overall, the survey data suggests that there are proportionately fewer family physicians accepting new patients in Canada in 2004 than in 2001 (20.2% versus 23.7% respectively, see Table 1).

Table 1. Family Physicians Accepting New Patients, 2001 and 2004, by Province/Territory and Urban/Rural Setting

Province/Territories	Location ⁱ	2001 Janus Survey Database			2004 National Physician Survey Database			FP/GPs Accepting New Patients - Percentage Point Difference Between 2001 and 2004 ⁱⁱ
		Number of FP/GP Respondents	FP/GPs Accepting New Patients		Number of FP/GP Respondents	FP/GPs Accepting New Patients		
			Number	Percent		Number	Percent	
Newfoundland and Labrador	rural	68	36	52.9%	64	34	53.1%	0.2
	urban	132	28	21.2%	149	50	33.6%	12.3
	other	19	8	42.1%	16	7	43.8%	1.6
Newfoundland and Labrador Total		219	72	32.9%	229	91	39.7%	6.9
Prince Edward Island	rural	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
	urban	**	**	**	**	**	**	**
	other	**	**	**	**	**	**	**
Prince Edward Island Total		49	11	22.4%	58	5	8.6%	-13.8
Nova Scotia	rural	74	23	31.1%	67	27	40.3%	9.2
	urban	326	41	12.6%	305	48	15.7%	3.2
	other	36	8	22.2%	44	5	11.4%	-10.9
Nova Scotia Total		436	72	16.5%	416	80	19.2%	2.7
New Brunswick	rural	56	11	19.6%	63	15	23.8%	4.2
	urban	204	18	8.8%	227	31	13.7%	4.8
	other	30	6	20.0%	23	7	30.4%	10.4
New Brunswick Total		290	35	12.1%	313	53	16.9%	4.9
Quebec	rural	555	151	27.2%	352	89	25.3%	-1.9
	urban	2,429	631	26.0%	1,693	376	22.2%	-3.8
	other	284	84	29.6%	228	36	15.8%	-13.8
Quebec Total		3,268	866	26.5%	2,273	501	22.0%	-4.5

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**Table 1. Family Physicians Accepting New Patients, 2001 and 2004,
by Province/Territory and Urban/Rural Setting (cont'd)**

Province/Territories	Location ⁱ	2001 Janus Survey Database			2004 National Physician Survey Database			FP/GPs Accepting New Patients - Percentage Point Difference Between 2001 and 2004 ⁱⁱ
		Number of FP/GP Respondents	FP/GPs Accepting New Patients		Number of FP/GP Respondents	FP/GPs Accepting New Patients		
			Number	Percent		Number	Percent	
Ontario	rural	482	76	15.8%	371	44	11.9%	-3.9
	urban	3,869	686	17.7%	3,486	442	12.7%	-5.1
	other	288	44	15.3%	297	46	15.5%	0.2
Ontario Total		4,639	806	17.4%	4,154	532	12.8%	-4.6
Manitoba	rural	112	56	50.0%	79	46	58.2%	8.2
	urban	308	85	27.6%	270	54	20.0%	-7.6
	other	69	26	37.7%	49	13	26.5%	-11.2
Manitoba Total		489	167	34.2%	398	113	28.4%	-5.8
Saskatchewan	rural	79	55	69.6%	50	37	74.0%	4.4
	urban	250	78	31.2%	261	123	47.1%	15.9
	other	51	25	49.0%	39	14	35.9%	-13.1
Saskatchewan Total		380	158	41.6%	350	174	49.7%	8.1
Alberta	rural	229	129	56.3%	135	86	63.7%	7.4
	urban	899	238	26.5%	922	218	23.6%	-2.8
	other	87	37	42.5%	117	27	23.1%	-19.5
Alberta Total		1,215	404	33.3%	1,174	331	28.2%	-5.1
British Columbia	rural	252	105	41.7%	189	80	42.3%	0.7
	urban	1,644	335	20.4%	1,322	226	17.1%	-3.3
	other	139	47	33.8%	120	21	17.5%	-16.3
British Columbia Total		2,035	487	23.9%	1,631	327	20.0%	-3.9
Territories ⁱⁱⁱ	rural	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
	urban	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
	other	**	**	**	**	**	**	**
Territories Total		39	14	35.9%	45	19	42.2%	6.3

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**Table 1. Family Physicians Accepting New Patients, 2001 and 2004,
by Province/Territory and Urban/Rural Setting (cont'd)**

Province/Territories	Location ⁱ	2001 Janus Survey Database			2004 National Physician Survey Database			FP/GPs Accepting New Patients - Percentage Point Difference Between 2001 and 2004 ⁱⁱ
		Number of FP/GP Respondents	FP/GPs Accepting New Patients		Number of FP/GP Respondents	FP/GPs Accepting New Patients		
			Number	Percent		Number	Percent	
CANADA	rural	1,943	657	33.8%	1,402	473	33.7%	-0.1
	urban	10,103	2,147	21.3%	8,691	1,577	18.1%	-3.1
	other	1,013	288	28.4%	948	176	18.6%	-9.9
CANADA TOTAL		13,059	3,092	23.7%	11,041	2,226	20.2%	-3.5

Data Sources: 2001 National Family Physician Workforce Survey (a.k.a the Janus Survey), College of Family Physicians of Canada; 2004 National Physician Survey, College of Family Physicians of Canada, Canadian Medical Association and Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada.

* Data are suppressed for urban/rural areas with fewer than 30 survey respondents.

** Value suppressed to ensure confidentiality.

i Location is based on physicians' self-reported primary practice population. Rural includes physicians who responded "rural" or "geographically remote/isolated". Urban includes physicians who responded "inner city", "urban/suburban" or "small town". Other includes physicians who responded that their primary practice population was "other" or who indicated more than one primary practice population.

ii Discrepancies are due to rounding.

iii Territories include Yukon Territory, Northwest Territory and Nunavut.

Although there are broad variations in the proportions of family physicians accepting new patients, the relative percentages for defined urban and rural places has remained generally constant over time. That is, urban or rural settings that recorded relatively low proportions of family physicians accepting new patients in 2001 also recorded low proportions of family physicians accepting new patients in 2004. Similarly, urban or rural settings that recorded relatively high proportions of family physicians accepting new patients in 2001 also recorded high proportions in 2004. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 1.

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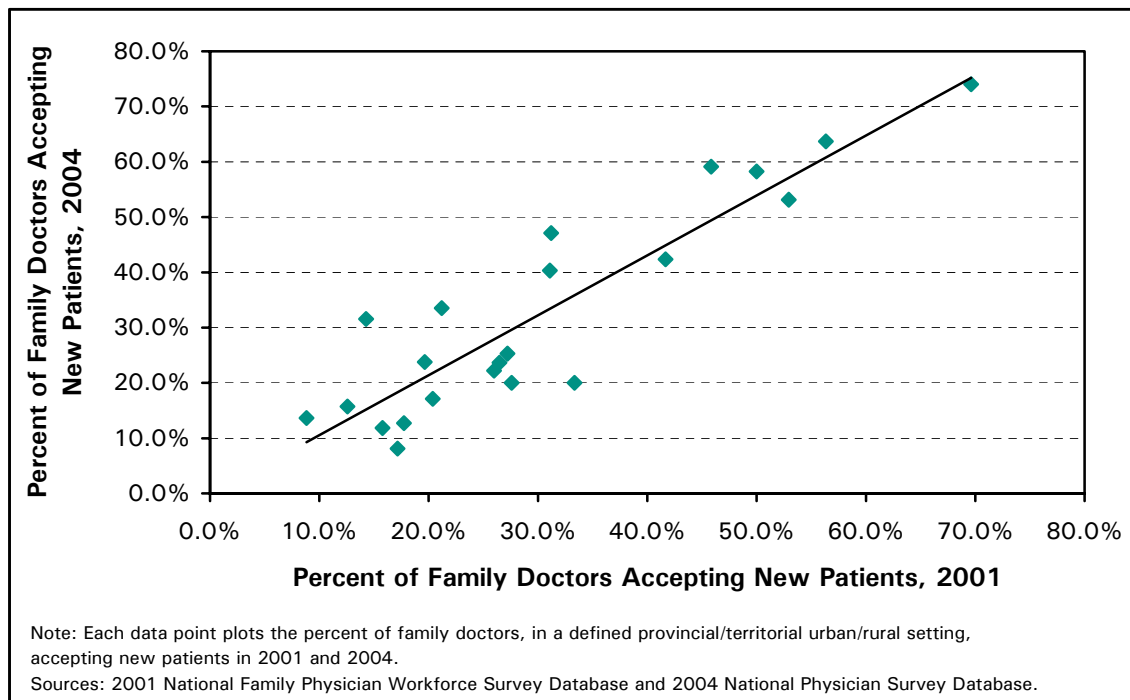


Figure 1. Relationship Between the Percentages of Urban and Rural Family Physicians Accepting New Patients in 2001 and 2004

Summary

As noted earlier, in spite of the growing number of family physicians in Canada, 15.8% of Canadians reported difficulty in accessing routine or on-going care in 2003. This analytical bulletin looks at one of many possible factors that may be related to primary care access—the percentage of family doctors who are accepting new patients.

Findings suggest that the practices of rural family physicians are more likely to be open to new patients than those of urban family physicians. Further research would help to better understand the possible relationship between closed physician offices and patient reports of difficulty accessing primary healthcare services. A wide variety of other factors—such as physician’s hours of work and scope of services, regional variations in physician supply, population age-sex demographics and the variable need for health care services—may play a decisive role in explaining why Canadians experience difficulties in accessing routine or ongoing care.

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Another key finding of this brief report is that, while specific urban/rural settings have registered marked increases/decreases in the proportions of family physicians accepting new patients, the relative standing of each defined region has remained generally stable over time. Areas that registered relatively low percentages of family physicians accepting new patients in 2001 are characterized by similarly low percentages in 2004. This finding may stem from documented issues related to physician recruitment/retention and the overall supply of family physicians, both within Canada and internationally.^{5, 6}

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Janus Survey Acknowledgement

The study described in this analytical bulletin was conducted utilizing original data collected for the College of Family Physicians of Canada's National Family Physician Workforce Database. This database is part of the College of Family Physicians of Canada's Janus Project: Family Physicians Meeting the Needs of Tomorrow's Society. Principal investigators for this study were: Dr. Calvin Gutkin, MD, FCFP, and Dr. Raymond Pong, PhD. The Janus Project Coordinating Committee was chaired by Dr. Nick Busing, MD, FCFP, and the Database Working Group was chaired in 1997 by Dr. Tim Kerr, MD, FCFP, and in 2001 by Dr. Brian Hutchison, MD, FCFP. The Centre for Rural and Northern Health Research (Director: Dr. Raymond Pong, PhD) was contracted to design the research strategy, assist in survey design and conduct the 1997 and 2001 surveys. The studies were also supported by the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI), the Canadian Medical Association (CMA), La fédération des médecins omnipraticiens du Québec (FMOQ), Health Canada, Scotiabank, Merck Frosst, Associated Medical Services (AMS), and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada (RCPSC).

National Physician Survey Acknowledgement

The study described in this analytical bulletin was conducted utilizing original data collected for the College of Family Physicians of Canada, the Canadian Medical Association, and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada's National Physician Survey Database. The study was also supported by the Canadian Institute for Health Information and Health Canada. The study and all of the data contained therein and the copyright protected works of the College of Family Physicians of Canada, the Canadian Medical Association, and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada cannot be copied or reproduced in whole or in part without permission of the College of Family Physicians of Canada, the Canadian Medical Association, and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada.

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