

Where Have all the Doctors Gone? 2005 - Feb Stephen Kamelgarn, M.D.

Recently, while I was undergoing the emotional agony of deciding to change from my clinic/hospital practice to a limited VA outpatient practice, I had the distinct feeling that I wasn't alone in my "scaling down" feelings. I mentioned this to Penny, and she dug out the recent statistics for the last year.

They're pretty amazing. In the past year there has a veritable exodus of physicians in our two county region. We have, or will soon have, lost nine primary care physicians to either retirement or relocation. In addition, there have been another eleven primary care physicians who have significantly altered their practices: either severely curtailing the number of patients in their practice or moving to something like the VA or Urgent Care, where we're not available to the vast majority of Humboldt-Del Norte. Five of the nine retiring/moving physicians are from Crescent City alone, while all eleven of the physicians down-scaling were from Arcata, Eureka and Fortuna.

The situation isn't much better in specialists either. In the same period we've lost, or will soon lose, 10 specialists: 4 orthopedists, 2 hospitalists and 1 each of dermatology, surgery, anesthesia, and nephrology.

To balance that out we've gained 5 new primary care docs (but two of them are Urgent Care physicians), 1 new anesthesiologist, and a whole new group of radiologists (but we aren't going to re-open that can of worms at this time).

That makes a net loss to the community of something on the order of 20-24 physicians. Since there is probably a total of something like 325 physicians up here we're talking 5% of the total physician population has become unavailable. *What is going on?*

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out why. Our little corner of paradise is catching up with the rest of the state where greater than forty percent of the practices are in danger of going bankrupt. But more than the miserly stipends reluctantly surrendered by the health insurers, is the phenomenal blizzard of forms, paperwork, pre-approvals, TAR's, and insane phone calls navigating idiot phone menus (devil's work, if ever there was) that really turns the insurance industry into the 9-headed hydra that can't be killed.

Couple this insane deluge of paper work with decreasing reimbursements, increasing overhead and the burden of night call, and voila, the perfect recipe for burnout. Several years ago CMA took a survey and found that approximately 60% of California physicians were seriously considering moving out of state, taking early retirement, or just bailing out altogether. I'm willing to bet that those numbers are even worse today.

Most of us have seen our incomes drop fairly significantly in the past five years, and yet, we're working harder than ever (the probable cause of our dissatisfaction and burn out), but because the heat is applied slowly and steadily, we're not even aware of the changes that are taking place until we crack. It's a lot like placing a frog in cold water and slowly increasing the heat, rather than throwing him into boiling water, only to watch him leap out of the pot, and hop across the floor. The frog won't be aware of the change in temperature until he winds up smothered in garlic sauce as the *specialité de la maison* in some French Restaurant.

All of us who are changing our job status have our individual reasons for doing so: some for health reasons, others to spend more time with family, others to cultivate outside interests, but the bottom line is that we are not deriving the satisfaction from practicing medicine that we once had. We find it onerous, burdensome and exhausting. The hospitalist program at St Jo's has the potential for eliminating the stress associated with call, by contracting with the local practices to cover their inpatients. This may help stem the tide of burnout, but it may be a case of too little, too late, with all the other stresses and strains that are placed upon us.

What does our leaving mean for the people of Humboldt and Del Norte Counties? It's never been easy to find a physician, and now, with so many of us pulling out of the availability pool, it will be even more difficult. Even now, fewer and fewer primary care docs are taking new patients, and it's harder to get in to see the physician, even after one is established. It's getting harder to get specialty referrals into our orthopedic and neurology colleagues' practices. And, as time goes on, that decreased availability will spread to more specialties.

If we extend scenario of more physicians leaving to the rest of the state or country, I think that we're beginning to see the unraveling of the health care system. The safety net is in shreds, and as more and more Americans lose health insurance and can't find physicians, even if they do have insurance, we will start to see more and more grumblings of discontent.

The last serious attempt at health care reform in 1993 was shot down by the insurance industry, who really showed who owned Congress. With the War in Iraq squandering the national wealth, health care reform is not on the front burner of today's administration. Yet, at some point, something, somewhere has got to give.

Physicians are unhappy and angry, the public is dissatisfied and angry, while Congress, along with "our war president," seemingly fiddle while the house burns.

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