

Addressing physician shortages in Canada: The significance of adjusting population aging and changing hours of work by physicians

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Context

Previous studies on physician shortages in Canada have predominantly focused on headcounts, billing systems, and burnout, disregarding the aspect of work hours due to data limitations. Unlike previous studies examining labor supply, our study utilizes up-to-date data spanning from 1987 to 2020 and adjusts for the significant impact of population aging and changes in physician work hours. Using the Labour Force Survey to incorporate these factors, we reveal notable shifts in expected medical services per person. This investigation offers valuable insights for medical professionals, the public, and governments when discussing and planning the optimal number of new physicians entering the field.

Key finding(s) from the research

In Canada, although the number of physicians per capita increased by approximately 35% from 1987 to 2019, the adjusted growth rate considering the population aging and reduced work hours by physicians was about -4% during the same period.

Population(s) studied: Physicians ages 28 and above

Research dataset(s) used: The Rebased LFS (1987-2020); Statistics Canada's Population Estimates; the Canadian Institute for Health Information's (CIHI's) historical data on the physician supply in Canada; and CIHI's data on physician expenditures by age and sex

Policy implications for this research

Canada has been facing challenges maintaining an adequately sized physician workforce for decades. In the past few decades, efforts to address this issue have involved recruiting foreign-trained physicians, increasing enrollment in domestic medical schools, and changing payment methods. Consequently, Canada's physician-to-population ratio has reached historically high levels. Despite these efforts, Canada continues to experience long waiting times for medically necessary specialist services and inadequate access to primary and emergency care. This article provides valuable out-of-box insights for future physician resource planning by combining the supply and demand sides to address these issues.

Policy area(s) this research can inform: Health; Labour; Statistical methods

Read the full article

Islam R, Kralj B, Sweetman A. (2023). Physician workforce planning in Canada: the importance of accounting for population aging and changing physician hours of work. *CMAJ*. 2023 Mar 6;195(9): E335-40. Available from: <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/195/9/E335.short>