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Opinion

Nadine Chata, MD
Vice-President, Family Medicine
Association of Residents of McGill (ARM)

Aris Hadjinicolaou, MD
President, Association of Residents of McGill (ARM)

Kamy Apkarian, MD
Vice-President, Internal Affairs
Association of Residents of McGill (ARM)

Howard Bergman, MD, FCFP, FRCPC
Chair, Department of Family Medicine
McGill University

Marion Dove, MD, CCFP
Director of Postgraduate Residency Education
Department of Family Medicine, McGill University

Future family physicians out of work?

In order to practise medicine in Quebec, family physicians must obtain a notice of compliance with the regional physician resource plan (*plan régional d'effectifs médicaux* or PREM) established by the Ministry of Health and Social Services (MSSS), in conjunction with healthcare stakeholders and the body representing Quebec's general practitioners, the *Fédération des médecins omnipraticiens du Québec* (FMOQ). Rarely, doctors can opt to practise in the region of their choice without a PREM position. In this case, they are then prohibited from re-applying for a PREM in that region for the next five years and are significantly penalized in their remuneration. It is important to highlight that PREMs, or similar systems that dictate where a physician can work, do not exist in any other Canadian province.

Each year, applications for PREMs are submitted between October 15 and November 15, with allocation of the majority of PREMs in December. In order to have a greater chance to be able to practice in this province, medical residents usually apply for multiple subregions, or local services networks (*réseaux locaux de services*, or RLs), in one or more of Quebec's 18 administrative regions. As of today, 44.8% of graduating family medicine residents at McGill University have not received a PREM or confirmation of a position as a family doctor in the province of Quebec.

The Ministry's presumed goal is to increase access to primary healthcare. In order to achieve this, it controls the allocation of physician resources through a complex and restrictive PREM application process. Not only is the geographical distribution of these local services networks for each region unclear, but the number of PREMs available per region was not released until two weeks after the application period opened, at which time the vast majority of family medicine residents had already sent in their applications.

Moreover, some clinics or regional management had already made under-the-table promises and even confirmed positions to residents prior to distribution of PREMs, therefore the number of positions available officially on paper was grossly overestimated compared to reality. The number of PREMs per region and RLSs should have been released months ahead of time, to enable residents to make informed choices. In addition to the lack of clarity regarding the allocation process, the criteria by which candidates *are* selected are not known. In fact, not every region even gave their applicants interviews. How can regions select candidates purely on the basis of a resumé and a letter of intent, since all candidates have received the same medical education?

Is it not contradictory to set up hurdles to prevent new primary care physicians from taking on patients when the Ministry's very goal is to ensure that each Quebecer has access to a family doctor? According to a poll conducted by the Association of Residents of McGill (ARM), 58.5% of respondents (24 out of 41) who had applied for a PREM in the Montreal region were unsuccessful. However, the phenomenon was not limited to the Montreal region, as many who applied to other regions, such as Mauricie, Estrie, Nunavik, and James Bay Cree Territory, were also unsuccessful. The true winners in this process are the other provinces, which will probably take in almost half of newly graduated family physicians from one of the world's top medical schools.

As of now, roughly half of our new graduates in family medicine who wish to serve the Quebec population do not have a confirmed position in this province. This means new family doctors who are bilingual, who are trained in Quebec, and who want to stay, simply may not be able to.

It is important to note that the medical residents who did not receive a PREM this year had applied for general outpatient primary care practice, and not for subspecialties in obstetric care, emergency medicine or in-patient hospital care. This model of family medicine practice provides cradle-to-grave care to each patient and is in line with the Ministry of Health's recommendation and goal of providing every Quebecer with access to primary care.

We need to remove barriers that prevent new and willing family physicians to provide our population with basic primary care and to reconsider the constraints of the PREM system in Quebec. The ARM is asking the Ministry of Health to bring in a PREM application process that is concise, fair, and transparent, one which would encourage physicians to come to Quebec to practice. This would include clear information regarding the application process, disclosing of the number of PREMs sufficiently ahead of the application period, condemnation of under-the-table promises, and publishing candidate selection criteria. If the government fails to act, not only will we continue to lose physicians trained in Quebec through the public's tax contributions, but over 13,000 Quebecers will remain without a family physician.

For information or interviews, please contact:

Johanne Carrier
514-591-0502 (cell.)