

# **Update on Health Care Workers**

Prepared for the  
Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse

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## **Update on Health Care Workers**

The Northern Alberta Labour Market Information Clearinghouse is a consortium of northern Alberta colleges and the Northern Alberta Development Branch.

This update report examines the demand and supply as well as potential shortages of health care workers in Northern Alberta as of November 2001. Specifically, the report focuses on the following health care occupations: physicians, pharmacists, registered nurses, licensed practical nurses, physiotherapists, and occupational therapists.

### **Physicians**

According to the *2001 National Family Physician Workforce Survey*, there are not enough physicians to serve the Canadian population. In absolute numbers the Canadian Institute for Health Information reports the absolute number of physicians in Canada declined from 29,361 in 1993 to 28,542 in 1998. It also indicated that in 1998, 253 family physicians and general practitioners left Canada to practice abroad. A further 572 physicians retired in 1998, a rate that is expected to increase as the large number of physicians who entered the work force in the 1960s begin to retire by 2010.

According to a report by the Canadian Institute for Health Information, the number of practicing physicians in Alberta rose from 4,485 in 1995 to 4,971 in 1999, an increase of 10.8 percent. In 1999, the physician ranks included 2,344 specialists (an increase of 15.4% over the 1995 figure) and family doctors grew from 2,453 in 1995 to 2,627 in 1999 (an increase of 7.1 percent). The Alberta government claims that the province has had the largest increase in physician numbers in Canada.

Despite this increase in physician numbers in Alberta between 1995 and 1999, there continue to be physician shortages reported in Northern Alberta. Regional physician requirements being requested by Northern Alberta regional health authorities as of November 15, 2001 are shown in Table One.

**TABLE ONE: ALBERTA REGIONAL HEALTH AUTHORITY  
PHYSICIAN REQUIREMENTS**

<b>Regional Health Authority</b>	<b>Number of General Practitioners Required</b>	<b>Number of Physician Specialists Required</b>
Keeweenaw	2	2
Lakeland	6	0
Mistahia	2	4
Northern Lights	0	4
Peace	4	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>10</b>

Source: *Rural Physician Action Plan*.

The Alberta government has announced a number of initiatives to increase the supply of physicians in Alberta. These include:

- In early 2000, the Alberta government announced 20 additional post-graduate residencies in each of the next two years and the creation of 40 new undergraduate medical school seats at the University of Alberta and University of Calgary.
- In August 2000, it was announced that \$4.5 million in new funding was being allocated to create a new program called “The Alberta Rural Family Medicine Network”. The program will create 40 new residency positions in rural Alberta. In July 2001, the first 20 trainees entered the new two-year rural family medicine training stream and 20 more trainees will be admitted in 2002. Eight spaces in the program are reserved for international medical graduates.
- An announcement was made by the Minister of Learning on January 17, 2001 that 14 new training spaces are being created for doctors at the University of Alberta and University of Calgary.

## **Pharmacists**

As Bev MacKeen’s Labour Market Information Clearinghouse Project report *Pharmacists* (April 2001) indicates, a shortage of pharmacists is a major concern in northern Alberta communities. According to the Alberta College of Pharmacists report *A Vacancy and Projected Hiring*

*Survey of Members* (April 2001), rural pharmacies might be closed due to a lack of pharmacists. A survey by the Pharmacists' Association of Alberta suggested that there were 88 pharmacist positions vacant in Alberta in March 2001. Approximately 37% of these vacancies were reported in rural areas.

Discussions have been held between the Alberta Government, the University of Alberta, and the Alberta College of Pharmacists with the goal of increasing the number of first year seats in the School of Pharmacy beyond the present 103. The current position of the University of Alberta is that no existing funding can be allocated to the School of Pharmacy. New provincial government funding is therefore needed to fund any increase in the number of seats at the School of Pharmacy.

Additional supply of pharmacists may come from outside Alberta. As of March 31, 2001, out of province pharmacists can write the Alberta exam and be eligible to practise in the province.

## **Registered Nurses**

According to the Alberta Association of Registered Nurses, there were 22,172 registered nurses employed in Alberta in 2000, compared to 21,988 in 1994 (a 1.4% increase). However, the number of Alberta registered nurses employed in nursing per 10,000 population declined from 80.3 in 1994 to 73.6 in 2000. This per capital rate puts Alberta in 10<sup>th</sup> place nationally. Only British Columbia and Ontario show lower numbers of registered nurses employed in nursing per 10,000 population.

The average age of Alberta registered nurses is the third oldest in Canada at 43.4 years of age, behind only B.C. and Ontario. In 2000, the Alberta Association of Registered Nurses (AARN) estimated that over 10,000 nurses will retire within the next ten years.

As part of this report, Bev MacKeen contacted representatives of Northern Alberta Regional Health Authorities relevant to the Northern Alberta Labour Market Information Clearinghouse. They were asked about shortages of various health care professions, including registered nurses. According to these Regional Health Authorities representatives, there are registered nursing shortages in all the northern Alberta health regions. Several commented that the aging nursing workforce is leading to a loss of nurses in their region. In Keeweenaw Regional Health Authority, there is a strong demand for nurse practitioners. In remote

northern Alberta communities, nurse practitioners take on many of the responsibilities performed by doctors in larger, urban centres.

On January 27, 2001, Learning Minister Lyle Oberg announced 247 additional spaces for registered nurses were being created in Alberta post-secondary institutions for the Fall of 2001. According to AARN Executive Director Donna Hutton, "The combination of an aging population, an aging nursing workforce, more complex health needs of patients and clients, and only slightly increasing number of nursing graduates, reinforces the need to increase enrolments in nursing education programs" (AARN News Release. *Nursing Per Capita Statistics Place Alberta in 10<sup>th</sup> Place Nationally*. May 23, 2001).

## **Licensed Practical Nurses**

There are presently 4,740 licensed practical nurses that are registered with the College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Alberta. Registrations are reportedly up for the second year in a row. According to the College, this increase is the result of such things as increased utilization of licensed practical nurses, an influx of licensed practical nurses coming from other provinces (particularly Newfoundland and Labrador), and former licensed practical nurses returning to the field.

According to the College of Licensed Practical Nurses of Alberta, the demand for practical nurses in Alberta is still ahead of the available supply. It reports that practical nursing students are often receiving one or more job offers before they graduate from training. The demand for licensed practical nurses is coming equally from both the acute care and continuing care sectors.

The shortage of licensed practical nurses in Northern Alberta that was previously reported in the 1999 Clearinghouse report *Seniors in Northern Alberta* appears to have eased. There also appear to be more full-time positions now being advertised for licensed practical nurses throughout Alberta, instead of part-time or casual positions.

Representatives in the northern Alberta regional health authorities interviewed by Bev MacKeen indicated that currently the supply of licensed practical nurses in their authorities are equal to the demand.

This seeming balance between licensed practical nursing supply and demand is likely due to the fact that the Alberta government has increased

the number of practical nursing training seats to 600, up from about 300 seats. An additional 225 individuals are taking a practical nursing distance delivery home study program offered through Norquest College. Also, there are an undisclosed number of employed nursing attendants in Alberta who are taking upgrading to become licensed practical nurses.

It is estimated that the majority of the 600 practical nursing students currently taking training will be graduating in 2002. Those taking the distance delivery home study program or upgrading will likely not graduate until 2003 or 2004.

## **Physiotherapists**

The exact number of physiotherapists (or physical therapists) practicing in Alberta is unknown. Conservatively, their numbers are estimated to be between 1,000 to 5,000. Physiotherapists are educated in Alberta through a four-year Bachelor of Science in Physical Therapy offered by the University of Alberta. The program admits 66 first year students each year.

There are obvious shortages of physiotherapists in Northern Alberta. In surveying the job postings for physiotherapists in Northern Alberta health regions relevant to the Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse, the following physiotherapy positions were being advertised as of November 28, 2001 by Northern Alberta regional health authorities relevant to the Clearinghouse.

**TABLE TWO: ALBERTA REGIONAL HEALTH AUTHORITIES' PHYSIOTHERAPY ADVERTISEMENTS**

<b>Regional Health Authority</b>	<b>Number of Physiotherapy Positions Advertised*</b>
Keeweenaw	0
Lakeland	5
Mistahia	6
Northern Lights	0
Peace	1
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>12</b>

*Source: RHA websites.*

In January 2001, Alberta Learning announced that an additional six spaces were created in Bachelor of Science in Physical Therapy offered by the University of Alberta.

A survey of health care professionals is currently being undertaken in Alberta by PricewaterhouseCoopers on behalf of the Quality of Worklife Working Group, a subcommittee of the Provincial Health Workforce Steering Committee. This web-based survey is seeking feedback from a variety of health care professionals, including physiotherapists. The focus of the survey is on career satisfaction and quality of worklife factors in Alberta. PricewaterhouseCoopers will prepare a report of the survey findings in 2002 and create a highlights report for public release.

## **Occupational Therapists**

The actual number of occupational therapists practicing in Alberta is not known. It is conservatively estimated to be between 1,000 and 5,000.

Shortages of occupational therapists identified by Northern Alberta health region representatives interviewed for the *Seniors in Northern Alberta* Clearinghouse report in 1999 continue in 2001. A review of job banks located on the various Northern Alberta Health Region websites show, as of November 28, 2001, the following occupational therapists positions being advertised in Northern Alberta health regions of relevance to the Northern Labour Market Information Clearinghouse:

**TABLE THREE: ALBERTA REGIONAL HEALTH  
AUTHORITIES' OCCUPATIONAL THERAPIST  
ADVERTISEMENTS**

<b>Regional Health Authority</b>	<b>Number of Occupational Therapy Positions Advertised*</b>
Keeweenaw	1
Lakeland	5
Mistahia	4
Northern Lights	1
Peace	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>11</b>

*Source: RHA websites*



In Alberta, the only Bachelor of Science Program in Occupational Therapy is offered through the University of Alberta. This four-year program has a quota of 74 students normally admitted each year. Of these, 64 are Alberta residents. In January 2001, Alberta Learning announced that ten additional occupational therapy spaces would be funded at the University of Alberta.

The survey of health care professionals is being undertaken in Alberta by PricewaterhouseCoopers on behalf of the Quality of Worklife Working Group is seeking feedback from occupational therapists.

## **Conclusion**

A review of supply and demand of key health care professionals in Northern Alberta suggests that in 2001 physicians, pharmacists, registered nurses, physiotherapists, and occupational therapists continue to be in short supply. However, additional spaces for all of these health care occupations have also been created in Alberta post-secondary institutions during 2001. Unfortunately, the effect of these additional training spaces is unlikely to be felt in Northern Alberta for at least several years.

Licensed practical nurses spaces in Alberta post-secondary institutions have doubled in the past year. Additional training through distance delivery and part-time classroom delivery will also add to the licensed practical nursing supply. Given that the educational program for licensed practical nurses is less than one year, the impact of these additional spaces appears to be having a positive effect in balancing the supply and demand for licensed practical nurses in Northern Alberta.

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