Spousal Perspectives On Factors Influencing Recruitment and Retention of Rural Family Physicians

Summary by Erin Mayo and Maria Mathews

Introduction

Attracting and retaining physicians to rural areas is a challenge in many regions of Canada particularly in rural provinces such as Newfoundland and Labrador. A complex mix of personal and professional factors influences physician recruitment and retention. Of these factors, concerns and experiences of the spouse and family are highly influential in the decision to move to, remain in, or leave a rural practice location. This study explored the experiences and perspectives of spouses of rural physicians to gain a better understanding of the factors that both directly and indirectly influence spousal contentment and how these factors contribute to recruitment and retention of physicians to rural practice locations.

What we did

We conducted 13 interviews with spouses of rural family physicians. All participants included in the study resided in a rural community for at least 6 months and their spouse was practicing in the region served by the Peninsula’s Health Care Corporation (PHCC) in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. Specialists, residents, locums, spouses of family physicians who practice but did not reside in a rural community and those living outside the jurisdiction of the PHCC were excluded from this study.

What we found and what it means

A conceptual framework was developed to understand how various factors influence spousal contentment. The framework includes two types of factors, indirect and direct. Indirect factors do not directly impact spousal contentment but rather provide background to the reasons why a physician moves to a rural community. Indirect factors include licensing requirements, characteristics of the community, and remuneration. For example, many international medical graduates (IMGs) move to rural Newfoundland because getting a Medical License is easier than in other provinces. As a result, once fully qualified, IMGs often move to urban areas or other provinces. Also, the safety of rural communities, the natural surroundings, community values and proximity to family and friends attract physicians to rural practice. However, distance from urban centres, limited professional and personal opportunities, and for IMGs, lack of cultural activities, deter physicians from choosing rural
practice. Lower remuneration, compared to other provinces, also discourages physicians from rural practice.

Direct factors have a more immediate impact on contentment and relate to retention rather than recruitment. They include physician workload, community integration, family and friends, children, employment opportunities and culture. Rural physician’s heavy workloads limit their involvement in family life and contribute to dissatisfaction. Social supports from family and friends, involvement in the community (through social and children’s activities) and employment activities contribute to contentment of spouses and the retention of rural physicians.

Recommendations

- Physician resource strategies that target remuneration alone will not promote physician retention. Policies should address the other factors that contribute to spousal contentment and ultimately retention.

- Contentment with rural practice location is related to previous experience in rural communities. Exposing medical students to rural medicine during all stages of training and recruiting students from rural communities may increase the likelihood of choosing rural practice.

- Since many IMGs move to rural practice locations primarily because of licensing requirements and not personal choice, strategies to promote retention may have little impact.

- Communities, physicians, medical schools and governments need to address spousal contentment with respect to recruitment and retention issues to positively meet the health needs of rural populations.

Take Home Message

Contentment of both physicians and their spouses is crucial for recruitment and retention. While there are a number of factors that directly influence spousal contentment, many of them are personal and as a result it is difficult to implement policies that will influence them. Understanding how these factors collectively influence one another and contribute to satisfaction with rural practice, will lead to the development of polices to support long-term retention of rural physicians.

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