

# Do they stay or do they go?

## Retention of provisionally licensed international medical graduates in Newfoundland and Labrador

### What's the issue?

Newfoundland and Labrador, like many other Canadian provinces, has a difficult time finding primary care doctors to practise in rural communities. It has historically relied on international medical graduates (IMGs) to serve in these areas.

The province introduced provisional licensing as a means of addressing the problem. It allows foreign-trained doctors who do not yet have a full license to work in under-serviced rural areas, with the stipulation that they earn their license within three years. Candidates must be graduates of a recognized medical program, have passed the Medical Council of Canada evaluating exam (MCCEE) and the first part of the Council's qualifying exam, and have a job offer approved by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Little is known about whether IMGs who come to Newfoundland and Labrador to get their medical license end up staying. Internationally trained doctors currently make up nearly a quarter (23%) of all doctors working in Canada. Saskatchewan and Newfoundland and Labrador have the highest proportion of IMGs (62% and 45%, respectively), Quebec (11%) and Prince Edward Island (16%) the lowest. Provisionally licensed IMGs currently make up about a third of the doctor workforce in Newfoundland and Labrador, compared to approximately five per cent across Canada. A recent study found

IMGs who enter Canada through a provisional licensing program tend to move on to a larger urban centre after they have their full license.

We conducted this study to determine how long IMGs stay in Newfoundland and Labrador compared to graduates of the province's medical school at Memorial University of Newfoundland, and graduates of medical schools elsewhere in Canada.

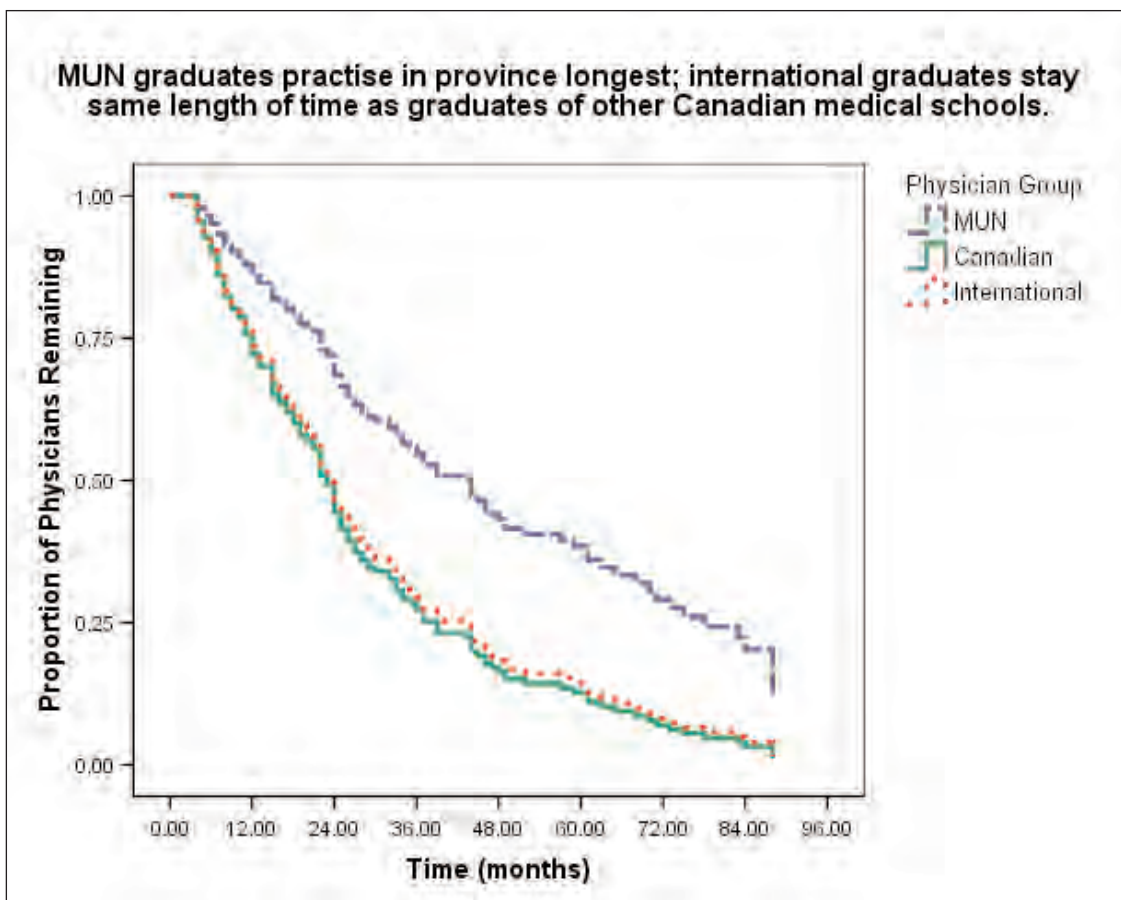
### How did we do our study?

We linked licensing data from the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Newfoundland and Labrador and the Scott's Medical Database with data on Memorial University post-graduate medical education. The Memorial database enabled us to identify which doctors did their residency training there; the Scott's database, which contains information about doctors across Canada, helped us determine where doctors were practising in 2004.

We identified all family doctors and general practitioners who received their first Newfoundland and Labrador medical license between 1997 and 2000, then followed them until 2004 to see how many stayed in the province and for how long. We looked at doctors who were here at least three months,

## What did we find?

- IMGs with provisional licenses made up the largest proportion of new doctors practising in Newfoundland and Labrador during this period. Of a total of 157 doctors, 77 were graduates of medical programs outside Canada, 42 were graduates of Memorial University's medical school, and 38 were graduates of other Canadian medical schools. It took most IMGs about 15 months to get their full license.
- On average, all three groups of doctors (IMGs, graduates of Memorial's medical school, and graduates from other Canadian medical schools) worked in the province for 25 months. Figure 1 shows the proportion of doctors in each group that remained in the province over time. Half of both the IMGs and other Canadian medical graduates had left the province after about 22 months. Doctors who graduated from medical school at Memorial University stayed in the province considerably longer: half stayed 39 months before leaving.
- Among the doctors we studied, 21 stayed in the province until 2004. Almost a quarter (22%) of those who left Newfoundland and Labrador returned to practise in the province at some point. The proportion of returning doctors was equally split among Memorial graduates, graduates of other Canadian medical programs, and IMGs. Most returning doctors (80%) were more recent graduates.
- When we included in our analysis doctors who worked in the province for three months or less, we found graduates of Canadian medical schools were less likely to stay in the province and remained for a shorter time than both Memorial graduates and IMGs.



## What do we think our findings mean?

- *Internationally trained doctors do not practise in Newfoundland and Labrador for very long after getting a medical license, but they stay as long as graduates of other Canadian medical schools.* This supports the widely held theory that the province serves as an entry point for IMGs who go on to set up practice elsewhere in Canada.
- *Few newly licensed doctors stay in Newfoundland and Labrador.* Half of the doctors in our study had left the province after about two years, and just 13% were still here seven years later.
- *Memorial University's medical school makes an important contribution to the supply of family doctors in Newfoundland and Labrador.* Graduates of Memorial tend to stay in the province longer after earning their license than doctors trained at other medical schools in Canada or graduates of programs outside the country.
- *There appear to be other factors besides the lack of religious/cultural opportunities that keep internationally trained doctors from putting down roots in Newfoundland and Labrador.* Although other studies have suggested this is why IMGs choose not to stay, we found graduates of medical schools elsewhere in Canada moved on just as quickly.
- *Today's newly trained doctors seem to be more mobile than earlier generations of doctors.* After securing their full medical license, many of the doctors in our study appeared to sample different communities in an effort to decide where they want to practise.
- *Our study focused on the impact of provisional licensing on retention of family doctors, so the findings do not necessarily apply to specialists.* Because our data did not include practice addresses for doctors, we could not determine which ones were working in rural areas, whether those doctors who stayed in Newfoundland and Labrador moved within the province, or whether IMGs moved to an urban centre after they got their full license.

## What do we recommend be done in response to our findings?

- *Newfoundland and Labrador should continue to grant provisional licenses to international medical graduates.* They made up the largest proportion of doctors in our study, outnumbering graduates of Memorial University's medical school and other Canadian medical programs. While IMGs do not stay in the province long after getting their license, they do, over the short term, meet the need for family doctors in rural areas. Ending provisional licensing would significantly reduce Newfoundland and Labrador's supply of doctors.
- *Further research should be done to determine why more doctors don't stay in Newfoundland and Labrador after they get their medical license.* We found that a high proportion of doctors from all three groups - IMGs, graduates of Memorial University's medical school, and those trained elsewhere in Canada - left the province. Although some IMGs may move to larger Canadian centres to be part of familiar religious or cultural communities, it is important to identify and address the reasons why graduates from Memorial and other Canadian medical schools choose not to stay in the province.
- *Newfoundland and Labrador should improve its strategies for recruiting and retaining MUN graduates.* Memorial University medical graduates are more likely to remain in the province than IMGs or doctors trained elsewhere in Canada. Efforts to improve recruitment of local graduates may help stabilize the province's supply of doctors.
- *The province should improve the quality of its data on doctors, to better inform recruitment and retention efforts.* Insufficient numbers of doctors is a chronic problem in Newfoundland and Labrador. However, existing data do not allow researchers to determine what impact factors such as rural location or type of provisional license have on how long new doctors stay in the province.



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For more information about the study, or to request additional copies of this summary report, contact Ms Sherry Hunt at (709) 777-6666; sherryh@mun.ca.

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