



Physician Shortages Forecast for Palm Beach County by 2011: Gaps of 48 Percent of Needed General and Family Practice Doctors; 66 Percent of General Surgeons; 39 Percent of OB/GYNs

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March 27, 2007 (West Palm Beach, FL) – Many patients in Palm Beach County – who are already having difficulties scheduling appointments with certain types of medical specialists – will face even greater challenges locating a specialist in the coming years, according to the first-ever Palm Beach County physician census. The census was conducted by the Palm Beach County Medical Society (PBCMS) on behalf of the Emergency Department Management Group (EDMG).

Within five years, it will be increasingly difficult to locate certain medical specialists in Palm Beach County. For example, the census forecasts that by 2011:

- Only 70 general surgeons will service the entire county, whereas an estimated 208 are needed for the forecasted population of just over 1.4 million residents. That represents just 34 percent of the needed general surgeons.
- Just 194 general and family practice doctors will be active; 373 are needed. That meets just 52 percent of the demand in the county.
- Physician shortages of at least one-third will exist among the following specialties: allergy/immunology; colon and rectal surgery; obstetrics and gynecology; pathology; psychiatry; radiation oncology; and thoracic surgery.

The census revealed that physician shortages already exist. There are 39 percent too few general surgeons in Palm Beach County today and eight percent too few general and family practice physicians.

“These shortages have a real effect on patients, and they are especially problematic when there are too few physicians to cover emergency room call when members of the community really need us,” said Dr. Jose Arrascue, president of the Palm Beach County Medical Society. “One reason this is happening is because too many good doctors view this as a hostile market, with high malpractice premiums, no protection from lawsuits, and low reimbursements for services, and decide to set up their practices elsewhere. We have to make doctors feel welcome here again.”

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The census also found that Palm Beach County's doctors are significantly older than their national counterparts. Only four percent of Palm Beach County's physicians are younger than 35, compared to 16 percent for the rest of the United States.

The forecast for 2011 was "age-adjusted" to account for likely physician retirements. Fully 38 percent of all physicians in the County are between 45 and 54, compared with 25 percent nationwide. Many physicians within this age range are included in a survey that found 51 percent plan to stop practicing altogether, reduce their workloads, or otherwise alter their practices significantly within the next one to three years.

"This census makes clear that we have a major physician shortage on the horizon for some specialties in Palm Beach County," said Rick Cameron, consultant to the PBCMS and project manager for the EDMG. "The problem only gets worse when you consider that older physicians in the county are likely to retire, and we don't have young physicians ready to take their place."

Emergency departments, already suffering from a lack of certain specialists – such as neurosurgeons, neurologists, and hand surgeons – may face greater challenges in the coming years unless certain changes are implemented. Just 883 physicians are taking emergency room call today out of 3,698 active physicians in the county, according to the census. Many physicians cite increased liability risk, the number of years they've already taken call, the lack of payment for services due to an increasing number of uninsured patients, and declining Medicare reimbursements among the reasons for not taking call.

The EDMG has been working on ways to offer on-call specialists immunity from lawsuits, reduce the rate of malpractice insurance – which can top \$100,00 for some doctors in South Florida, and encourage more young physicians to come to Palm Beach County by creating a more hospitable climate to practice.

Both the Medical Society and the EDMG have asked citizens to contact lawmakers in the Florida statehouse to encourage them to pass House Bill 929 and Senate Bill 2060, which would protect on-call specialists from lawsuits and create more opportunities to train residents in Palm Beach County as two steps to help ease the physician shortage.

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The Palm Beach County Medical Society is a not for profit organization dedicated to uniting physicians to serve the common interest of the profession, developing and maintaining the highest professional and ethical standards of the medical profession, advocating the interests of physicians and their patients and collaborating with others to improve the community's health.

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