

The Physician Shortage and Health Care Reform



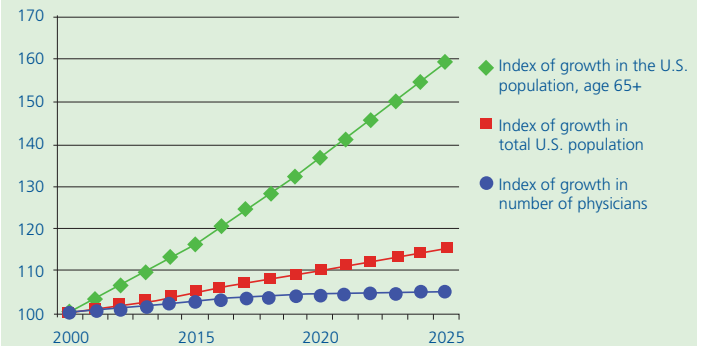
The United States is expected to face a shortage of 124,000–159,000 physicians by 2025.¹ Potential reforms, such as universal health care coverage, will add to overall demand for doctors and increase the projected shortfall by 25 percent. An acute physician shortage will have a profound impact on health care access, quality, and costs, especially for Americans who are already underserved.

The optimal number of physicians needed to care for the growing and aging U.S. population is a complex calculus of interrelated supply and demand variables. Ultimately, the solution lies in addressing projected physician shortages, increasing efficiency, making better use of all health care professionals, and developing new models of care.

The Physician Shortage: A Crisis Looms

- **Health care access, quality, and costs will be affected by an acute U.S. physician shortage.** Americans will be forced to wait longer and travel farther for appointments; they will turn more frequently to emergency rooms, resulting in higher costs; and quality of care may suffer because individuals may delay treatment.
- **There is mounting evidence that a physician workforce shortage exists in both primary care as well as in a number of specialties.** While the number of U.S. graduates selecting a family medicine career has fallen 27 percent between 2002 and 2007,² the number of general surgeons in the United States has decreased by nearly 26 percent since 1981;³ and a recent Institute of Medicine study revealed that emergency rooms are overburdened and experiencing shortages of on-call specialists. In addition, specialties that primarily serve the elderly, such as cardiology, oncology, and geriatrics, have projected significant shortages in the coming decade.
- **The shortfall in physicians will affect everyone, but the impact will be most severe on vulnerable and underserved populations.** These groups include the approximately 20 percent of Americans—or 64 million people—who live in rural or inner-city locations designated as health professional shortage areas.
- **The problem will grow worse as the U.S. population increases and ages.** The U.S. Census Bureau projects that the population will grow by more than 50 million (to 350 million) between 2006 and 2025. This alone likely will lead to a considerable increase in the demand for physician services. Moreover, an aging population is projected to drive demand up and supply down: As the Baby Boomers age, they are more likely to develop complex and multiple conditions, requiring more extensive medical care. At the same time, more than one in three physicians is currently over 55 and likely to retire within the next two decades.

Population Trends Foretell a Major Shortage of Physicians



The growing and aging U.S. population foreshadows an increasing shortage of physicians over the next 15 years.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Division; Dill, Michael J. & Edward S. Salsberg. 2008. *The Complexities of Physician Supply and Demand: Projections through 2025*. AAMC: Washington, DC.

What Can Be Done

Because it can take up to 14 years to educate and train a new doctor, the AAMC believes the U.S. must act now to avoid this shortage. Specifically, the AAMC and its members support:

- **Increasing medical school enrollment by 30 percent by 2015**, as recommended by the AAMC in 2006
- **Lifting caps on the number of residency positions financed by Medicare**, as proposed in the “Resident Physician Shortage Reduction Act of 2009” (S 973/HR 2251)
- **Doubling the number of National Health Service Corps awards** to help more physicians practice in underserved areas
- **Implementing a comprehensive reform strategy** that includes increased use of nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and other health professionals
- **Introducing new care models, such as the “medical home,”** that provide continuous and coordinated care and make better use of all health care professionals, thereby enhancing efficiency, increasing patient satisfaction, and improving health outcomes.

¹ The Complexities of Physician Supply and Demand: Projections Through 2025. Center for Workforce Studies, Association of American Medical Colleges, 2008.

² Association of American Medical Colleges/American Medical Association GME Census. JAMA Vol. 300(10), 2008.

³ Lynge, Dana C. et al. A Longitudinal Analysis of the General Surgery Workforce in the United States, 1981-2005. Archives of Surgery. 2008. 143(4):345-350.

Key Points on the Physician Shortage and Health Care Reform

- Problems with health care access, quality, and costs will worsen unless we address the U.S. physician shortage.
- There is mounting evidence that a physician workforce shortage exists in primary care as well as in a number of other specialties.
- While the shortfall in physicians will affect everyone, the impact will be most severe on vulnerable and underserved populations.
- The optimal number of physicians needed is a complex equation of many interrelated factors.
- The physician shortage will grow worse as the U.S. population increases and ages.
- Increased efficiency, different care models, and better use of all health care professionals must be part of a comprehensive reform strategy.