

# ACP AMERICAN COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS

## INTERNAL MEDICINE | *Doctors for Adults*

### Workforce Trends

**“Unfortunately, there won’t be enough of us.** A combination of high student debt and an unfavorable economic environment is causing many of us to choose careers other than general internal medicine or family practice—the two specialties that aged and disabled patients most depend on for their primary care. According to CMS, in 2004 almost half of all Medicare expenditures on office visits were for services provided by primary care physicians.”  
-- Vineet Arora, MD, chair of the Council of Associates of the American College of Physicians

There is growing evidence that shortages are developing for U.S. physicians, particularly in general internal medicine and family practice. Previous expectations of an excess supply of physicians have not materialized. Current projections indicate that the future supply of primary care physicians will be inadequate to meet the health care needs of the aging U.S. population, especially as “Baby Boomers” are beginning to reach retirement age in 2011, when they will be at increased risk for needing health-care services.

The aggregate demand numbers do not tell the whole story, however. As adult patients age, their need for primary care physicians increases dramatically, requiring proportionately more physicians per 100,000 population to meet the increased demand.

The Association of American Medical Colleges exit survey of graduating seniors found that the number of students choosing General Internal Medicine as a career has dropped precipitously in the past 4 years (12.2 percent in 1999, 10.2 percent in 2000, 6.7 percent in 2001, and 5.9 percent in 2002).

Another recently-published study of the career plans of internal medicine residents documents the steep decline in the willingness of physicians to go into primary care. In 1998, 54 percent of third-year internal medicine residents planned to practice general internal medicine compared with 27 percent in 2003. Strikingly, in 2003, only 19 percent of first-year internal medicine residents planned to pursue careers in general medicine.

The trend away from primary care has been well documented by the annual residency training match sponsored by the National Resident Matching Program (NRMP). The number of U.S. medical school graduates who choose to enter generalist residency training has decreased from 50 percent in 1998 to less than 40 percent in 2004. The decline has been greatest in family medicine training programs, which has declined 41 percent. Internal medicine and pediatrics declined by 9 percent and 8 percent respectively. In the 2004 match, the percentage of residency training positions filled by U.S. medical school graduates was only 41 percent in family practice, 55 percent in internal medicine residencies and 71 percent in pediatrics.

*Reversing this decline will require immediate action by policymakers.* The long pipeline of medical education and training and the retirement and career changes of older physicians necessitates that the nation have a constant influx of new students embarking on medical careers. As the population ages, and larger numbers of patients encounter chronic and more complex illnesses, the need for general internists and family physicians will increase. The need for primary care physicians, who can provide first contact and comprehensive continuing care for adults, will continue to increase as the population ages and its health care needs increase, and as the demand for acute, chronic and long-term care increases.