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Congress must act on primary care physician crisis in U.S.

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As a physician in Mississippi, I am concerned about the crisis in primary care which is growing more critical each year. Patients are already experiencing difficulties in finding primary care physicians and general internists specifically. This problem will only worsen as the population ages.

As the governor of the Mississippi Chapter of the American College of Physicians, representing over 600 physicians, I know this is not an isolated problem.

My clinic in Jackson has been unable to recruit a primary care internist from University of Mississippi Medical Center in over 10 years. We have been successful in attracting some out-of-state physicians but this source is drying up as well. Internal medicine groups throughout the state are experiencing similar difficulties, especially in non-urban areas.

In 2007, only 23 percent of the third-year internal medicine residents planned to pursue careers in general internal medicine, down from 54 percent in 1998. Even more disheartening, only 2 percent of fourth-year medical students planned to become general internists. This last statistic is much closer to the reality of our own state medical school. In 10 short years, we have dropped from over half of internists going into primary care to virtually none. Our colleagues in family medicine are experiencing similar difficulties although their statistics are not quite as drastic.

At the same time these fewer physicians are entering primary care, there is an increasing exodus. Approximately 21 percent of general internists who were board certified from 1990-1999 have left internal medicine. This compares with only a 5 percent departure rate for sub-specialists. Also, 43 percent of Mississippi physicians are over age 50, when many are beginning to limit their practice or retire.

Comprehensive legislation is needed to preserve patient access to primary care services. The American College of Physicians has developed a framework for a legislative proposal that is expected to soon be introduced in the U.S. Congress. This legislation provides scholarships for medical students who agree to practice in a critical shortage health facility.

Mississippi has a Rural Scholars Program that provides scholarships for medical students who agree to serve in rural areas. These programs need full funding.

A very serious deterrent for residents to enter primary care is debt burden. Over 86 percent of graduating medical students have educational debt. The average amount in 2007 was over \$139,000. The higher the debt load, the less likely students are to choose primary care residencies, instead choosing higher-paying specialties or sub-specialties. The proposed legislation would offer loan forgiveness to those who agree to serve in a critical shortage area.

The proposed legislation would provide funding to assist small to mid-size practices to become Patient Centered Medical Homes, which allows compensation for care coordination. Also included are medical payment reforms to increase payments for services provided, principally by primary care physicians, among other initiatives.

It is imperative that Congress act immediately to preserve access to primary care for everyone.

Numerous studies show that medical quality indicators improve in regions with the higher ratios of primary care physicians. To improve quality, a sustainable source of primary care physicians is mandatory. If changes are not made, we could easily see the collapse of our medical system that would dwarf the current financial crisis faced by our nation. The primary care crisis is real and must be addressed

The presidential candidates have differing proposals to deal with the problem of the uninsured but even if everyone had coverage they would not have access to care if primary care physicians are not available to render this care. I ask readers to please encourage all of our elected officials to address the primary care physician crisis that is upon us.
