



# Innovative recruitment

Chief physician recruiters get creative as provinces try new strategies to hire doctors **BY ABIGAIL CUKIER**

**V**irtual reality tours. \$150,000 signing bonuses. International missions. This is the new world of physician recruitment in Canada.

The country needs more physicians. A 2022 survey found that one in five Canadians does not have a family doctor. And the challenge is growing. Canada is expected to be short almost 44,000 physicians, including more than 30,000 family doctors and general practitioners by 2028, according to an RBC study.

This shortage is attributed to factors including the limited number of medical school students and a cap on residencies, as well as the challenges international medical graduates face in trying to work here.

While the country aims to fix this shortage, provinces need to get creative to recruit enough physicians to treat their citizens.

“We are not graduating enough new physicians, and physicians are relocating to different regions across Canada, which benefits the community they are relocating to, but not the overall healthcare system in Canada,” said Carly Cox, lead for the Canadian Society of Physician Recruitment. “Every province and territory is striving to develop lucrative and attractive offerings to physicians. Some are more ahead than others and most are starting to break down the barriers to internationally trained physicians, which is a great sign.”

Cox says that physician recruitment has always been challenging but the pandemic shed light on the importance and gaps within the healthcare system.

Brad van den Heuvel, director of physician recruitment for the Greater Hamilton Health Network, says the pandemic also affected recruitment in his city. “If a physician’s spouse or partner

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does not need to go into their office any more, some are willing to move further away from the Greater Toronto Area,” he says.

### VIRTUAL TOURS

Rebecca Gill, director of health workforce, recruitment and pharmaceutical services for the Prince Edward Island Department of Health and Wellness, says during the pandemic, doctors, perhaps looking for a slower pace or a more COVID-19-safe province, decided to return home to P.E.I. or to relocate there. It also forced the recruitment team to get creative.

In 2021, when doctors were unable to travel to P.E.I. due to travel restrictions or increased work commitments, the Physicians Recruiting Physicians program worked with a local company to create a virtual reality tour of Summerside, P.E.I., which offers 360-degree views of the beach, local ice rink, walking trails, ice cream parlours and restaurants, all narrated by chief physician recruiter Dr. Megan Miller. It also features physicians talking about what it is like to live and work in Summerside and views of the operating room and emergency department. The team also created a tour of Charlottetown.

They sent the virtual reality headsets to physician leads in other provinces and now that they have returned to conferences, they take them there too.

“It became a very effective recruitment tool and a great way to start conversations and showcase what P.E.I. has to offer,” Gill said. “We’ve had some people who saw the virtual reality content and then said they want to do a locum in P.E.I. or come visit with their family in the summer.”

The Physicians Recruiting Physicians (PRP) program, implemented in early 2021, is a partnership between the Medical Society of Prince Edward Island, Health PEI and the P.E.I. Department of Health and Wellness. “It introduced a chief physician recruiter, which meant we now had a physician working with us on the frontlines of recruitment, carrying authentic messages about what it is like to live and work as a physician and helping navigate some of the concerns that physicians might have,” Gill said.

“The program empowered our current physicians to be a part of the recruitment process and it bolstered our recruitment work. We have seen our recruitment numbers increase.” In 2021 and 2022, P.E.I. recruited 31 and 29 new physicians respectively, compared to 20 in 2020, before the PRP program started.

Gill says another draw to P.E.I. is the government’s commitment to collaborative health centres and establishing patient medical homes. “Physicians want to work as part of a collaborative team,” she said. “Another draw is our provincial

electronic medical record. No other province has that and, because of P.E.I.’s size, we can do these kinds of innovative undertakings.”

### LOCUMS

Van den Heuvel agrees that doctors are looking to work in team-based care, and he believes that is a draw for Hamilton, which has many team options, including the largest family health team in the province, with more than 160 doctors.

Of course, physicians are also looking for features like good schools for their children, affordable housing and entertainment and recreation opportunities, van den Heuvel says, as well as job opportunities for partners. He says many physicians are also interested in locum positions.

In 2022, Hamilton recruited 31 family doctors for locum positions and 35 permanent family doctors. But in the same year, 32 family doctors retired or moved. Recruitment numbers are increasing though. In 2019, Hamilton recruited 20 physicians. Numbers have risen every year since (except for 2020). Hamilton has 365 family doctors, not including those on short-term contracts. Based on its 2021 population of 569,355 and the Ontario Ministry of Health recommended ratio of family doctors to residents, Hamilton at full capacity would have 438 family doctors.

To support recruitment, van den Heuvel’s team conducts annual succession planning forums to guide physicians nearing retirement on how to make their practice more attractive to new recruits. They also attend local and provincial recruitment conferences and are increasingly attending U.S. and international conferences. In fact, last year more than half of Hamilton’s recruits completed medical school and residency abroad, both Canadians and from other countries. This year, the team will attend conferences in Scotland and Ireland.

Many provinces, including Newfoundland and Labrador, are also working on ways to make it easier for physicians to work in their jurisdiction, such as reviewing licensing and registration criteria and streamlining the licence application process. The Newfoundland and Labrador government also launched the Physician Signing Bonus Program. General practice and specialist physicians who agree to provide up to five years of service in the province can receive up to \$150,000, with an additional \$25,000 for physicians recruited into the most difficult-to-fill positions.

Meanwhile, Horizon Health in New Brunswick is offering a \$2,000 reward to community members who successfully refer a doctor to them. There is no limit to the number of candidates a person can refer.

For many of these recruitment initiatives, it will take time to determine their impact. But a physician shortage has led to innovation. “Recruitment is complex. It’s not just putting a job in front of somebody and they sign on the dotted line,” Gill said. “A lot of conversations have to happen. You are asking someone to move from a different province or a different country. A lot of work needs to happen.

“It’s a balance of quality and speed. We need to be efficient, but we also want to ensure we’re hiring quality health professionals who will be a great fit for our system and will choose to stay here for a long time.” **MP**