National Survey Points to a “Silent Exodus” of Physicians

Research Commissioned by The Physicians Foundation Shows Changing Practice Styles May Limit Patient Access to Physicians

Boston, MA, September 24, 2012— American patients are likely to experience significant and increasing challenges in accessing care if current physician practice patterns trends continue, according to a comprehensive new survey of 13,575 practicing physicians. One of the largest physician surveys ever undertaken in the U.S., the research was commissioned by The Physicians Foundation, a nonprofit organization that seeks to advance the work of practicing physicians and help facilitate the delivery of healthcare to patients.

Physicians are working fewer hours, seeing fewer patients and limiting access to their practices in light of significant changes to the medical practice environment, according to the research, titled “A Survey of America’s Physicians: Practice Patterns and Perspectives.” The research estimates that if these patterns continue, 44,250 full-time-equivalent (FTE) physicians will be lost from the workforce in the next four years. The survey also found that over the next one to three years, more than 50 percent of physicians will cut back on patients seen, work part-time, switch to concierge medicine, retire, or take other steps likely to reduce patient access. In addition, should 100,000 physicians transition from practice-owner to employed status over the next four years (such as working in a hospital setting), the survey indicates that this will lead to 91 million fewer annual patient encounters.

“It is clear that the introduction of nearly 30 million new patients into the U.S. healthcare system through healthcare reform, added to the already growing physician shortage, will have profound implications for patient access to medical care,” said Walker Ray, M.D., vice president of The Physicians Foundation and chair of its Research Committee. “Combine this with changes in practice patterns that reduce the number of hours physicians spend seeing patients and the situation is truly alarming. These practice changes amount to a silent exodus of physicians from the workforce. When these lost hours are added up, we get a much fuller and more ominous picture of the kind of access crisis that patients may soon face.”

More than half of physicians (52 percent) have limited the access of Medicare patients to their practices or are planning to do so, while one out of four physicians (26 percent) have already closed their practices altogether to Medicaid patients, the survey shows. Physicians cited rising operating costs, time constraints and diminishing reimbursement as the primary reasons why they are unable to accept additional Medicare and Medicaid patients.

The survey, conducted by email from late March to early June 2012 by Merritt Hawkins for The Physicians Foundation, is based on responses from 13,575 physicians across the U.S. The overall margin of error (MOE) for the entire survey is (μ ± 0.998 percent), which indicates a “low to very low” sampling error for a survey designed to draw opinions and beliefs from a large population, according to statistical
response experts at the University of Tennessee who evaluated survey responses. Generally, an overall MOE at 99 percent confidence is considered highly trustworthy at +/- 2 percent or less, and all questions within the survey met this criterion.

Physician Morale

An overwhelming 80 percent of physicians cited “patient relationships” as the No. 1 most satisfying part of their job. Yet the survey also found a majority of physicians, 77 percent, are pessimistic about the future of medicine. Eighty-two percent believe they have little ability to change the healthcare system. Multiple factors were cited as driving widespread feelings of discontent among the nation’s physicians. “Liability / defensive medicine pressures” (related to potential malpractice lawsuits) was cited first, followed by “Medicare / Medicaid / government regulations,” “reimbursement issues” and “uncertainty / changes of health reform.” These issues and others cited throughout the study tend to distract or interfere with the time physicians spend with their patients, according to survey respondents.

“The level of pessimism among America’s physicians is very troubling,” said Lou Goodman, Ph.D., president of The Physicians Foundation and CEO of the Texas Medical Association. “More than 84 percent of physicians feel that the medical profession is in decline and nearly 58 percent are reluctant to recommend medicine as a career to their children. That means we need to make significant changes to ensure that we preserve the patient-physician relationship and continue to have the brightest minds going into medicine.”

Healthcare Cost Drivers

When asked about the factors driving increases in healthcare costs, “defensive medicine” was cited as the No. 1 cause for 69 percent of physicians, followed by an “aging population” (65 percent). On average, older patients visit physicians three times as often compared to younger patients. Other factors ranked included “cost of pharmaceuticals,” “advances in technology / treatment” and “social conditions.”

Additional survey findings of note include:

- Close to 92 percent of physicians are unsure where the health system will be or how they will fit into it three to five years from now
- More than 62 percent of physicians said Accountable Care Organizations (ACOs) are either unlikely to increase healthcare quality and decrease costs, or that that any quality / cost gains will not be worth the effort
- Physicians are divided on the efficacy of the “medical home” concept, and many (37.9 percent) remain uncertain about their structure and purpose
- While close to 70 percent of physicians have implemented electronic medical records (EMR), 47.4 percent have significant concerns that EMR poses a risk to patient privacy

“The 13,000 plus physicians who participated in this landmark survey, which included nearly 8,000 open-ended responses, strongly demonstrates the overwhelming desire of America’s physicians to share their perspectives and concerns about the current state of medicine,” said Tim Norbeck, CEO of The Physicians Foundation. “The accuracy, rigor and sheer scope of this survey should make it an invaluable
piece of research to policy makers, healthcare providers, media and other stakeholders that truly want to understand the challenges that face America’s healthcare system.”

Please visit www.physiciansfoundation.org for more information or click here to access the full report.

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**About The Physicians Foundation**

The Physicians Foundation is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization that seeks to advance the work of practicing physicians and help facilitate the delivery of healthcare to patients. It pursues its mission through a variety of activities including grantmaking, research, white papers and policy studies. Since 2005, The Foundation has awarded numerous multi-year grants totaling more than $28 million. In addition, The Foundation focuses on the following core areas: physician leadership, physician practice trends, physician shortage issues, and the impact of healthcare reform on physicians and patients. As the healthcare system in America continues to evolve, The Physicians Foundation is steadfast in its determination to strengthen the physician-patient relationship and assist physicians in sustaining their medical practices in today’s practice environment. For more information, visit www.PhysiciansFoundation.org.

**About Merritt Hawkins**

Merritt Hawkins is the leading physician search and consulting firm in the United States and is a company of AMN Healthcare (NYSE: AHS). For more information, visit www.merritthawkins.com

**Press Contacts:**

Luna Newton  
CooperKatz & Co. for The Physicians Foundation  
lnewton@cooperkatz.com  
917-595-3061

Matt Panichas  
CooperKatz & Co. for The Physicians Foundation  
mpanichas@cooperkatz.com  
917-595-3064

Phil Miller  
Merritt Hawkins  
Phil.miller@amnhealthcare.com  
469-524-1420