Hamiton doctor shortage persists despite gains

Recruiting initiatives are paying off, but area still falls below national average

File photo of a family doctor examining a baby. Getty Images/Comstock Images

Hamilton is still short 26 family doctors despite an increase in physicians that is vastly outpacing provincial and national rates.

The number of family doctors per 100,000 population jumped nearly 15 per cent between 2008 and 2011 in the Hamilton Niagara Haldimand Brant Local Health Integration Network (LHIN), which includes Burlington.

That is triple the national increase of five per cent and higher than Ontario’s roughly 11 per cent rise calculated from stats released Wednesday by the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI).

“Our numbers in Hamilton were pretty dismal eight years ago,” said Jane Walker, Hamilton’s physician recruiter. “We were continually losing physicians every single year. The numbers increasing basically means we’ve gotten back to where we were.”
The same trend continued with the number of specialists per population rising about 12 per cent compared to just over eight per cent provincially and nationally.

“I’m not surprised by that increase and I’m obviously really pleased and very encouraged by it,” said Walker. “But we still have a ways to go. We can’t stop recruiting.”

Despite the gains, the area still needs more family doctors, the national report shows.

The number of general practitioners per 100,000 population increased to 87 in 2011 from 76 in 2008. But it’s still lower than the provincial rate of 95 and national rate of 106.

“It’s not a drastically low number in Hamilton,” said Yvonne Rosehart, program lead for the physician database at CIHI. “It’s slightly below the average.”

That translates to roughly 35,880 residents with no family doctor in Hamilton alone.

“New patients to the community do still find it hard to find family doctors but certainly not as hard as they found it five years ago,” said Dr. David Price, head of family medicine at McMaster University and Hamilton Health Sciences. “But we know if we don’t pay attention to recruitment and continue to recruit, we’ll slip back again.”

The number of doctors in Hamilton can be deceiving because many have teaching and research duties affiliated with the medical school that prevent them from caring for as many patients. Price said many doctors in Hamilton carry a patient roster of about 850 to 950 instead of the usual 1,500.

But the medical school also means Hamilton has more specialists than many other Ontario cities.

The LHIN is right on the national average for the number of specialists — at 103 per 100,000 population. That is above the provincial rate of 99.

Hamilton area doctors are about a year older than the national average of between 50 and 51 years of age.

About 40 per cent of its family doctors are women. That drops to 30.5 per cent for specialists. These numbers are similar to the national and provincial statistics.

This area has more foreign-trained physicians, however. About 68 per cent of Hamilton’s doctors are Canadian-trained compared to about 73 per cent provincially and 74 to 77 per cent nationally.

Walker says many of the 24 physicians recruited to Hamilton this year are new grads from Ontario medical schools. The city recruits about four internationally-trained doctors a year along with four more from the United States.

This is the first year in about eight years that the number of doctors recruited exceeds those lost.

jfrketich@thespec.com

905-526-3349 | @Jfrketich