

## David B. Bridgeo, MD CCFP

2224 Walker Road, Suite 160  
Windsor, ON, N8W 5L7  
CANADA

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Phone 519-974-1862  
Fax 519-974-3876

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Letter to the Windsor Star

The Coalition of Family Physicians of Ontario is an organization representing grass roots physicians on the front line of health care. Formed in 1996, its main mandate was to bring forward the voice of the family doctor and to raise awareness on issues which affect the delivery of health care. Traditionally, the Ontario Medical Association has acted as the primary bargaining body in dealings with the provincial government and Ministry of Health. Unfortunately, over a period of years it became increasingly evident that the OMA was not appearing to be responsive to the needs and wishes of a large number of physicians within the association. It is from this that the COFP was born. It includes in its membership roughly 3000-4000 family doctors which represents a little over half of the total number of practicing family physicians in the province. One of its most prominent mandates now is to address the issue of family doctor shortages. At present there are over 900,000 Ontario citizens who are without a family doctor and this number is expected to grow significantly over the next few years.

There are a number of factors which have contributed to the family doctor shortage over the past number of years including cuts to medical school enrollment, elimination of the "rotating internship", stagnation of office fees, failure to recognize the complexity of office based practice and most recently, the despised auditing mechanism of the Ministry of Health. I will focus on the latter three issues today as these are the most immediate and most easily fixed.

Throughout the last ten to fifteen years increases in fees for office consultations have fallen well behind the rate of inflation. This fee stagnation has come to the point where it is making it difficult to continue on in a traditional office base practice. The Ontario Health Insurance Plan and the OMA have also made a serious error in not recognizing the time and increasing complexity of dealing with problems in the family doctors office. As a result, a doctor will get paid the **exact same amount** for dealing with a cold in the walk-in clinic as an office based family doctor will receive for dealing with a complex and multiple problem visit. These complex visits are more time consuming and require much more resources, ie support staff and behind the scenes administrative work. As more of the population ages, this problem will grow worse. This has had a significant effect on the number of family doctors, as many of them have migrated from office based practice into walk-in-clinic work or have moved out of the country. **NEW GRADUATES WILL NOT GO INTO FAMILY PRACTICE UNTIL THIS INEQUITY IS FIXED!**

The practice of auditing medical records by the Ministry of Health and Medical Review Committee is one which has gone on for many years. It has recently become very intimidating for practicing physicians. Many doctors who have been audited have been devastated by this process in which a doctor's records are scrutinized and money is taken back due to lack of detail in their notes. This has a direct effect on physician supply as MD's now feel that they must write detailed notes in order to satisfy provincial auditors (more time writing notes, less time seeing patients). Unfortunately, the Medical Review Committee and the Ministry of Health seem to value documentation far more than the actual service provided. Most of us as practicing physicians are not even certain of the criteria that are used to grade us if and when we should be unfortunate enough to be called before this committee. This has created a chill in doctors offices across the province. In the last several years Ontario has become a very doctor unfriendly place to practice.

There are a number of things which can be done to attract greater numbers of family doctors. However, the number one problem is poor funding. At the present time OHIP pays on average between eleven and sixteen dollars for an individual office visit after the office expenses are taken off. This figure has stayed pretty much stagnant over the past ten to fifteen years. This has resulted in several things: 1) Family doctors closing office practices due to high overhead costs and moving into walk- in work which is quicker, less intensive, and certainly much cheaper to operate. 2) The numbers of new medical graduates entering family practice residency programs is at an all time low. A number of seats are not even filled. One of the major reasons for this is the poor remuneration that family doctors receive for their services. As in the free market, human capital will flow according to supply and demand and the ability to command the best income for a particular field of work. In order to change this disturbing downward trend, traditional office based family practitioners will need no less than a forty percent increase in fees in order to stem the hemorrhage from this field of work. Given our current health care budget of nearly thirty billion dollars per year, this increase would be relatively small at about four hundred million dollars. A small price to pay for a healthy primary care system.

Our politicians know what needs to be done. The question is whether or not they have the will to do it. Make sure to let them know how you feel on this issue. Your future health may depend on it!

David B. Bridgeo, MD CCFP  
Family Physician, Windsor, ON  
Member, Coalition of Family Physicians.