

A radical prescription

These aren't your grandfather's doctors: A new generation of medical professionals is striving for a better work-life balance than the 90-hour weeks shouldered by their older colleagues. But as young physicians turn off their pagers and clock out earlier, health planners fear the doctor shortage may get even worse

PATRICK WHITE

From Monday's Globe and Mail

November 5, 2007 at 8:39 AM EST

Call her crazy, but Salima Alladina needs a little downtime once in a while: a few moments to sleep in her own bed, to eat something that hasn't dropped from a vending machine, to catch her breath after shifts that start three hours before sunrise and rarely let up as the day goes on.

Like many doctors under 40, Ms. Alladina simply wants time for a life beyond seafoam scrubs and pager beeps. "My life is a bit more important than my work," she says.

In most professions, that notion would verge on cliché. In medicine, where 90-hour work weeks are not out of the ordinary, it's downright incendiary.

"There's a huge [contingent] of older doctors who were raised in a different culture," Ms. Alladina, 27, says. "Some expect medicine to be your life 24 hours a day. You feel guilty for taking a pee break."



Doctors like Aida Sadr, 27, reject the long, tiring work hours common among older physicians. (*John Lehmann/The Globe and Mail*)

Formatted: Right: 18 pt

Recently, health-care administrators have come to the same harsh realization as managers in other professions: Pay and prestige are no longer enough to goad young workers into clocking long, tiring hours. And while that generational shift is cause for minor consternation in most workplaces, it's posing a grave conundrum for health planners.

The country will have a shortage of 5,800 doctors by 2010, according to Health Canada estimates. When computer models factor in young doctors' aversion to the long hours common among physicians born during the baby boom, that shortage tops 10,000.

"What we hear validated all over the country is that this is a major, major issue," says Derek Puddester, a psychiatry professor at the University of Ottawa who has researched generational differences in the health-care industry and led workshops on the topic at hospitals across the country. "Among younger generations, there is a complete dismissal of this macho bravado, work-till-you-die attitude."

A Canadian Institute for Health Information report released two weeks ago found that the number of physicians in Canada is keeping pace with population growth.

But there was a hidden problem behind those numbers: New doctors are unwilling to work as long as their predecessors.

In 2003, doctors under the age of 45 worked nearly nine fewer hours per week than the same age bracket did in 1982, knocking one-fifth off the average young doctor's work week.

That's creating tension in clinics and hospitals across the country where older doctors have been slow to adjust to the workplace proclivities of their youthful colleagues.

"Some of them think we're whiners," says Aida Sadr, 27, who finished medical school in June and has chosen to practice in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside. "They'll tell us that when they were our age they worked crazier hours."

According to Mr. Puddester, young doctors rankle senior doctors by, among other things, leaving work exactly when their shift ends rather than putting in heaps of overtime, using handheld computers at bedsides, and unabashedly halting their careers for maternity or paternity leave.

"Older generations might mistake this as young doctors putting themselves in front of patients," Dr. Puddester says. "It can cause a lot of anger."

So what's driving young doctors to spend more time at home?

When Ms. Alladina started medical school, she fully intended to work as long and as hard as any older physician.

Formatted: Right: 18 pt

But one year in, she slowly curbed her enthusiasm.

"I realized there is a lot of political stuff to get past and that doing this can really eat away at your entire life and the person you become," said Ms. Alladina, who would have gone into surgery if it weren't for the extreme hours. "I started rearranging my priorities. Medicine shouldn't be your entire life."

In an attempt to eke out a life beyond the hospital doors, she's hoping to become an emergency room doctor.

The shifts can be late and hectic, but when she finishes for the day, "I won't have to carry a pager. I can go home and relax."

Boomers might be quick to label this laziness, but demographic experts say it's part of a massive generational shift in the workplace.

Members of Generation X and Generation Y - those born between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s - grew up watching parents dedicate themselves to jobs, only to have their loyalty rewarded with the mass corporate layoffs of the 1980s and 1990s.

These youngsters also came up in a school system devoted to building self-esteem with team activities, no-fail report cards and loose homework deadlines. Their attentive parents solicited their opinions about everything from what to have for dinner to what kind of car to drive.

"These children grew up to think that they could go anywhere and do anything," says Giselle Kovary, co-founder of the human resources consulting firm n-gen People Performance. "They don't want their career to be their whole life and it's not difficult to see why."

Another factor in the shrinking workweek is the increasing number of women entering the profession. Nearly half of all doctors under 40 are women, many of whom are taking significant periods of time off to raise families, according to the CIHI report.

Facing such an ominous shortage, health planners are scrambling to find ways of closing the hours gap between old and new physicians.

Solutions range from recruiting from abroad and increasing medical school enrolment, to devising new financial incentives targeted at young doctors.

Hospitals and clinics are also devising team approaches to treating patients so that physicians don't have to worry about patients when they're off the clock.

"Perhaps there could be higher remuneration for working longer hours," says Geoff Ballinger, manager of health human resources for the CIHI. "Or maybe they could be encouraged to do more research, if that's their area of interest."

Formatted: Right: 18 pt

There are signs that the work ethic of young doctors may do the reverse of what's expected. Younger doctors tend to spend more time with individual patients, which could keep patients from becoming serial visitors.

"Our focus is shifting to prevention," Dr. Sadr says. "It's not the old paternalistic model of a scruffy, old doctor offering a patient an antibiotic and saying 'call me in the morning.' I don't know many young doctors who could sustain 10 minutes per patient and not go crazy."

Pulling shorter hours could also cut down on the high rate of burnout in the profession.

"Maybe we'll have happier doctors," Dr. Sadr says. "That's not such a bad thing."

Formatted: Right: 18 pt