Improving Access to Primary Care in Underserved Areas
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Abstract

Delivery of healthcare in underserved areas has always been a challenge, partly because only one out of five graduating physicians chooses to settle and practice in those areas. The problem is compounded by the decreasing number of graduates training in primary care; only 42% of available family practice positions were filled by graduates as of March 2009.

In order to recruit and retain physicians in underserved areas, the following recommendations should be considered:

- Improve pay for primary care physicians, including a permanent adjustment of the Medicare and insurance pay scale and tax breaks for primary care physicians, especially those who practice in underserved areas.

- Increase the numbers of primary care residencies with emphasis on practicing in clinics in underserved areas. Studies have shown approximately 70% of primary care residents choose to stay in the local area they trained in after graduation.

- Expand the National Health Service Corps (NHSC) and adjust the Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) designation system, which directs the provision of primary care providers into the underserved areas.
  - If the above measures fail to achieve the desired objectives, a mandatory one-two year service in the underserved areas for all graduating residents, nurse practitioners and physician assistants should be considered.

- Tort reform would encourage physicians to practice in those areas and take ER call, which many choose not to, due to the increased risk of being sued.