

“Loss of doctors from rural locations increasing steadily” is an editorial that appeared in *The Medical Post* on October 9, 2007.

This editorial is in relation to a series of studies titled *Distribution and Internal Migration of Canada’s Health Care Workforce* published by the Canadian Institute for Health Information. Dr. Roger Pitblado, Senior Research Fellow of the Centre for Rural and Northern Health Research, is the author of this series of studies.

All reports of *Distribution and Internal Migration of Canada’s Health Care Workforce* are available online at www.cihi.ca

Loss of doctors from rural locations increasing steadily

CIHI report finds Alberta, B.C. and Ontario principal destinations of migrating MDs

by David Hodges

SUDBURY, ONT. | A new Canadian Institute for Health Information report reinforces long-standing concerns about critical doctor shortages in many rural communities and shows that Alberta is now the top destination for doctors on the move.

“Distribution and Internal Migration of Canada’s Health Care Workforce,” a unique study that looked at the intra- and inter-provincial supply and migration patterns of the majority of health-care workers in Canada between 1986 and 2001, showed that rural areas of the country lost on average 1.3% of their physicians to urban areas every year between 1986 and 2001.

Net losses for rural physicians through migration was 9.4% for the years 1986 to 1991, 4.1% for the years 1991 to 1996 and 8.3% for the years 1996 to 2001.

By way of comparison, rural net losses were also common for the general population (except from 1991 to 1996, when net gains were experienced), but the rate of departing rural-based physicians—particularly for general practitioners—was still significantly greater.

“Rural Canada is losing physicians at a great rate and increasingly over the last few years,” Dr. Roger Pitblado, lead author of the study and a senior research fellow at Laurentian University here, told the *Medical Post*.

The reason? “It’s a combination of things,” Dr. Pitblado said. “It’s a hard go in rural Canada—very small numbers of physicians are dealing with an increasing, aging population.

“I don’t think it’s a money thing per se in terms of attracting physicians in rural Canada.”

Alberta, B.C. and Ontario

Additional findings from the CIHI report showed that mag-

net provinces such as Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia typically attracted the largest number of physicians to move from one province or territory to another.

Ontario and particularly B.C. were the principal destinations for interprovincial migration in the earlier years of the study, but in recent years Alberta has claimed this distinction.

In comparison with these provinces, Newfoundland and Labrador, Manitoba and Saskatchewan had more physicians move out of province than into the province during each of the one-year migration periods in the study.

“We know a fair amount about the distribution of physicians but we don’t know enough about the details of their mobility, and that’s a dynamic component,” Dr. Pitblado said. “That dynamic component hasn’t been properly incorporated in health human resources planning models.”