Region facing medical specialist shortage

By Maggie Clark
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Southwest Florida is facing a severe shortage of specialty physicians — and psychiatrists, pulmonary doctors and anesthesiologists will be in high demand statewide, according to a report released Tuesday.

To keep pace with an aging population, Southwest Florida is projected to need double its current number of general surgeons and certain specialists by 2025, consulting firm IHS Global Inc. said in a report on behalf of the Safety Net Hospital Alliance of Florida and the Teaching Hospital Council of Florida.

In all, Florida will need an additional 7,000 physician specialists in the next decade, the report said.

IHS Global concluded that the state should consider providing more money for medical residency programs to encourage more young doctors to stay in Florida.

Report author Tim Dahl told the Florida Senate health policy committee in Tallahassee that the Legislature should calculate how much money is warranted.

To fill the projected shortage of specialists, Florida would need to create and fill 13,568 residency positions — 1,360 new slots each year for the next decade — according to a separate study by the Safety Net Hospital Alliance.

Sarasota Memorial Hospital is already working to create a residency program in partnership with Florida State University's medical school, officials say.

That program will begin accepting about 10 residents per year as soon as July 2017.

The three-year internal medicine residency program would include clinical rotations in the much-needed fields of cardiology, pulmonology and critical care, hospitals officials say.

In time, Sarasota Memorial would like to become a teaching hospital and offer a general surgery residency, said Dr. Steve Taylor, chief medical operations officer.

Late last year, the hospital's board allocated $5 million to begin creating the program.

“Creating a residency program is the next logical step in Sarasota Memorial’s progression to become a teaching hospital, but it’s also an important move for our region,” Taylor said. “Without more residency programs, the physician shortage that Florida is experiencing will only worsen as our population swells and our existing physician workforce retires.”

In general surgery, in particular, large numbers of doctors are nearing retirement age and fewer younger physicians are being trained to replace them, Taylor added.

No surprise

Florida appears to have an adequate supply of primary care physicians, including pediatricians and general internists, the report stated.
That runs counter to many national-level reports, which show a large need for primary care physicians stemming from the increase in the number of people insured under the Affordable Care Act.

“The shortfall of primary care physicians is small, and if current trends continue, this shortfall will disappear within the next decade,” IHS Global stated about Florida’s picture.

In Sarasota, Desoto, Charlotte, Glades, Lee, Hendry and Collier counties, there will be physician shortfalls in all specialties by 2025 — and in primary care doctors, the report found.

During the next 10 years, the region will need an additional 263 family practice physicians, 115 psychiatrists, 109 general surgeons, 173 radiologists and 177 anesthesiologists.

Throughout Southwest Florida, the only specialty projected to meet the growing demand is ophthalmology.

The shortages are no surprise to Dr. Bruce Berg, a pulmonologist and the dean of the Sarasota campus of the Florida State University Medical School.

“Being a physician has never been easy, but now more than ever, doctors are being closely monitored and held to metrics and increasingly strict laws,” Berg said.

Most doctors also have to assume large amounts of debt during their decade-long training and schooling, Berg added.

Even so, medical school waiting lists are longer than ever.

More than 5,200 students applied to Florida State’s medical school last year for just 120 spots, Berg said.

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