



By Michael A. Schwarz for USA TODAY

Physicians wanted: J. Ocie Andrews, dean of the Florida State University College of Medicine, center, observes medical students by way of video cameras in the Clinical Learning Center control room. Florida State's medical college is the country's first new medical school since 1982. Readers weigh in on a pending shortage of doctors in the USA.

Health care depends on enough medical workers of all types

USA TODAY's report "Medical miscalculation creates doctor shortage" brings welcome attention to our nation's medical workforce (Cover story, News, Thursday).

Do we have enough doctors? The right mix of specialists? And are they practicing where they are needed?

In recent years, it seems the only health professionals widely thought to be in short supply are nurses. However, it's clear that access to good health care is also related to having enough doctors, pharmacists and clinical laboratory technologists.

I do, however, disagree with the take of Richard Cooper, director of the Health Policy Institute at the Medical College of Wisconsin, on the shortage. Cooper says the public will suffer from insufficient medical care because of poor analytical work on the part of some government officials. He also says, "a bunch of people cooked numbers to support a position that was obviously wrong." That's absurd.

As the previous chair of the Council on Graduate Medical Education, a committee authorized by congressional lawmakers to advise them and the secretary of Health and Human Services, I can assure the public that our efforts to ascertain the adequacy of the physician workforce in the United States were done using all the data available to us. Information came from public and private sources and in consultation with medical professional organizations. Anyone who has attempted to determine the right number of any type of health professional knows it is a difficult task, as much art as it is science.

But because tax dollars pay for much of medical education, the public has a vested interest in making sure we have enough doctors

types — not just "specialists" who will be needed to care for aging baby boomers.

David N. Sundwall, M.D.
Executive director
Utah Department of Health
Salt Lake City

Re-entry programs are key

Although USA TODAY's article focuses on increasing medical school graduates as a way to expand the number of practitioners, re-entry programs may also play a valuable role.

Physicians may leave clinical practice for a variety of reasons. Some may want to return to professional activity. But personalized education programs and testing to ensure clinical competency are required.

A federal task force examined re-entry issues in 2000. It recommended that graduates of federally supported re-entry programs provide clinical services, for a period of time, in underserved areas as a form of repayment.

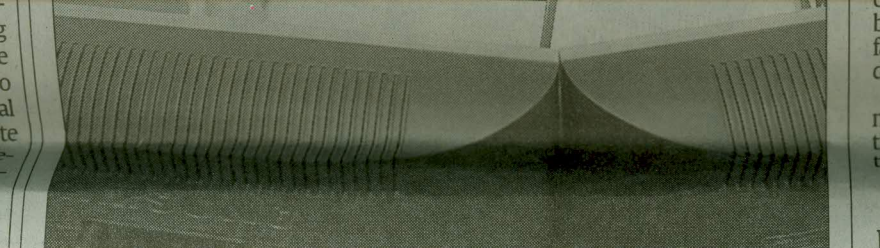
To date, federal funding has not been designated for physician re-entry programs. The task force hoped that through these efforts, re-entering doctors would have the opportunity to provide quality health care to populations that are often neglected.

Saralyn Mark, M.D.
Washington

Take responsibility

It's disheartening that in the wake of rising health care costs and an obesity epidemic, there remains little emphasis on taking more responsibility for one's own health.

More than other generations, baby



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Cooper alleges that we need a lot more specialists to serve the demands of our aging population. I can't imagine a more costly solution, one that undoubtedly would add fuel to the fire of rapidly escalating health care costs.

What we really need to improve the overall health status of Americans are enough health care professionals of all

types — not just "specialists" who will be needed to care for aging baby boomers.

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More than other generations, baby boomers face a greater issue than a lack of medical doctors: a reliance on drugs to restore health.

Doctors are vital for emergency treatment, but Americans need to look more toward themselves for preventing disease and creating long-term good health.

Sandy Doman
Rockville, Md.