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State facing shortage of residency programs

Retention rate leading to doctor shortage in Florida, officials say

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Courtney Whittington was raised in Tallahassee. She hopes her 2-month-old daughter Linnea also will grow up in Florida.

But the new mom faces a dilemma because of her career choice.

Whittington, 27, is a fourth-year medical student at Florida State University. In March, she'll learn whether she has received one of the coveted and limited Florida residencies — known as post-medical school training.

The odds are against the Leon High graduate training in pathology in Florida. There aren't enough medical residencies to accommodate the increasing number of students graduating from Florida's medical schools, state officials say.

While other states are also struggling, it's critical in Florida — the country's fourth-highest populated state. There are nine medical schools in the state, two of them in their first year. Medicare funds about 40 percent of the federal residencies, and a total of 110,713 residency positions exist nationwide.

Only 30-40 percent of the state's medical students are placed in Florida residencies, which is causing the number of doctors in Florida to decrease. Studies have shown doctors are more likely to practice in the state where they complete their residency program.

"For us to be educating all these doctors and not be able to train and license a like number is not a good deal for our citizens," Sheila McDevitt, chairwoman of Florida's Board of Governors, said. "Florida is a net exporter of doctors and what we produce in medical school graduates.

"We are exporting about 60 percent and we are not receiving in-kind from other states the replacements because we do not have the residencies that are necessary."

Everyone agrees it's a troublesome situation. State University System officials including Chancellor Frank Brogan, McDevitt and others will be traveling to Washington, D.C., to speak with federal lawmakers by the end of the year.

They hope to impress upon lawmakers the dire straits Florida faces, needing about 2,700 additional residency slots to adequately provide training for the state's medical school graduates.

"We're trying to take advantage of timing and make our case that this is a very effective way to provide medical care to people who can't necessarily afford to get it," McDevitt said.

A 30-page Board of Governors report revealed that the number of people per physician in Florida far exceeds national averages. There are 23,259 patients for every general surgeon in Florida. The national average is 11,268 patients per general surgeon, according to the report.

The report cites that, "Florida is about to 'cross the line' by having more medical school graduates

each year than the state's number of GME (graduate medical education or residency) positions."

It's possible Florida crossed that line this spring. Dr. Alma Littles, senior associate dean for medical education and academic affairs at FSU's medical school, said the initiative to increase the number of medical school students — a request made by the Association of American Medical Colleges to keep up with population growth — has worked.

But the number of residency positions hasn't increased. In fact, within the last five years, residencies in Florida have decreased, creating heightened competition the likes of which educators have not seen before.

"We hit the wall this year," Littles said. "In the past it's usually been pretty easy to get a student placed. It's getting to be a pressure cooker in the country nationwide."

Littles said the students are attuned to the state's shortcomings. She said many of them want to stay in the state.

"There has got to be more (residency) programs if you want to keep the doctors in Florida," Whittington said. "We have more areas in Florida that need more doctors."

According to the Board of Governors' report, "Resident physicians provide about 75 percent of Florida's indigent, under-insured and uninsured patient care at an estimated value of close to \$1 billion."

One ray of hope exists for increasing the number residencies in Florida and across the country. In May, three senators, including Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., introduced the Resident Physician Shortage Reduction Act of 2009.

The measure — which is not funded — proposes to increase medical residencies nationwide by as much as 15,000.

Dr. John Fogarty, dean of FSU's College of Medicine, is concerned that lawmakers aren't tuned in to the problem.

"I'm afraid with all the things going on in Washington, D.C., we'll lose some momentum or be stricken out of the bill to save money," he said.

In the spring, 70 percent of FSU's students were assigned to residency programs outside of Florida. At the University of Florida, 118 students graduated in the spring — and only 33 went on to residency programs in Florida.
