

## Will the doctor be in for you?

By Jennifer Ryan, Tribune  
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The number of physicians available to the state's population is below the national average, a warning sign that access to health care could be more difficult in the future, according to researchers of a report released Monday.

The report, completed jointly by the Arizona State University W.P. Carey School of Business and the University of Arizona Health Sciences Center, found the ratio of physicians in Arizona for every 100,000 people was 208 last year compared with a national average of 283. The disparity exists despite a 51 percent increase in Arizona's physician work force from 1994 to 2004, which outpaced population growth.

Still, the number of doctors may not be enough for the state's climbing population, said Dr. Mary Rimsza, an ASU research professor who helped compile the report.

"It's concerning that we have far less (physicians) than are available nationwide. It would suggest we have a greater need for physicians," she said. "I think it should raise concerns to the public about whether they have enough doctors in the state."

The opening of a medical school in Phoenix by the University of Arizona College of Medicine will not boost the ranks of doctors fast enough, the report says.

Given the time required to educate medical students, the earliest the new graduates would be able to practice is about 2014, Rimsza said.

Another obstacle involves the unchanging number of spots in residency training programs over the past several years. Students often choose to practice in states where they did their residencies.

With a limited number of medical schools and residency programs, Arizona will need to continue to draw the bulk of its physicians from other states, researchers said. That means working on ways to make the state more attractive to physicians, they said.

Researchers are working on a second phase of the study, which will examine physician productivity and the population's health care needs.

Without more physicians, patients will continue to pack doctors' offices, surgery schedules and emergency departments, said Dan Mitten, associate executive director of the Maricopa County Medical Society.

"We're increasing our population by millions of individuals and the number of physicians is growing slowly. Physicians aren't prepared for that volume of patients," he said. "Getting in to your physician will get harder and harder. Those are signs of what's to come."

Arizona exceeds the national average for the number of primary care specialists, with 41 percent of doctors practicing family medicine compared with 38 percent nationwide, the report states.

That number, however, is expected to decline in Arizona with the decreased number of residency positions available in family medicine.

While the number of primary care physicians, hospital-based physicians and surgeons has grown since 1992, the number of physicians practicing in allergy, cardiovascular diseases, endocrinology, gastroenterology, hematology, and infectious disease has decreased, the report found.

Andrea Smiley, a spokeswoman for the Arizona Medical Association, said she couldn't get an appointment with an endocrinologist until February 2006.

In some specialties, doctors are inundated. Dr. Miriam Anand, a Tempe allergist, said her four-doctor practice gets up to 50 new patients a week in busy seasons. New patients are seen in about two weeks, she said. At internal medicine practices, the wait can be two to four months.

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