

# 20,000 in N.B. on MD wait list and we're doing well: province

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## By the numbers

The number of people who have signed up for the Patient Connect NB registry by region: Fredericton: 2,300 Moncton: 2,200 Saint John: 3,400 Miramichi: 250 Edmundston: 300

More than 20,000 New Brunswickers have signed up for a waiting list meant to connect them with a family doctor, yet the provincial government says statistics show the province is actually doing well at providing access to primary care services.

That's a troubling assessment, according to officials with the New Brunswick Medical Society, who say they're concerned about what they believe is a shortage of practitioners.

Dr. Édouard Hendriks, vice-president of medical, academic and research affairs for the Horizon Health Network, who also leads the organization's physician recruitment efforts, told Brunswick News last week there are "very few" physician vacancies in the province.

An online list of postings for physician vacancies says there are 82.5 physician vacancies in New Brunswick - 29.5 family medicine positions and 53 specialist positions.

Paul Bradley, a spokesman for the Department of Health, said that as of the start of this month there were actually only 24.5 family physician vacancies and 24 vacancies for specialists in New Brunswick, explaining that some vacancies stay online until the practitioner actually begins working.

"The Department of Health is working to ensure that we have the right specialists and health care professionals in New Brunswick," he said.

"The provincial government is taking steps to enhance doctor recruitment initiatives and is actively working with the regional health authorities and the New Brunswick Medical Society on establishing a coordinated approach to physician recruitment."

For instance, he said, the Department of Health has hired a recruitment co-ordinator, who has been asked to oversee hiring efforts and to develop a strategy to attract physicians to the province and prepare succession plans for key regions and positions.

"In New Brunswick approximately 20,200 people are searching for a primary health care provider, which represents less than three per cent of the provincial population," he said.

"The Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI) has ranked New Brunswick No. 1 in Canada for citizens having ongoing access to a primary care provider."

The CIHI's data says 93.9 per cent of New Brunswick citizens reported that they had a regular family doctor in 2014.

That compares well to British Columbia's 84.9 per cent, Alberta's 80.1 per cent, Quebec's 74.8 per cent, and even Ontario's 92.5 per cent.

But things aren't entirely rosy, the data suggests.

New Brunswick performs near the national average in providing timely access to care for older citizens, the data shows.

Four provinces - Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador, British Columbia and Ontario - posted better rates for residents aged 55 years or older getting in to see a doctor within two days.

Data collected by the New Brunswick Health Council in 2014 suggests that of those who do have a family doctor, only 30.1 per cent reported being able to book an appointment with their practitioner within 48 hours.

When the council asked New Brunswickers where they typically access primary care services, 17 per cent reported using after-hours or walk-in clinics, while 11.5 per cent said they usually visit their local emergency department for care.

Anthony Knight, CEO of the New Brunswick Medical Society, is aware of those figures.

He said that he'd like the provincial government and the province's two regional health authorities to take a harder look at the province's physician ranks.

"We are surprised by the level of optimism expressed by the Horizon Health Network respecting the recruitment and retention of physicians in New Brunswick.

We disagree with the assessment that New Brunswick does not have a shortage of physicians," he said.

"Rapid access to primary care through a family physician is key to supporting a healthy population. Currently, New Brunswick is not performing well in this area due to physician vacancies, but also due to large patient loads in many existing practices."

He said the society believes there is a shortage of physicians in both the Horizon and Vitalité networks.

"We believe that the Department of Health needs to take more concrete steps in physician resource planning," he said.

"This includes adding new physician positions to the system to respond to the growing needs of an aging population."

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