

YOUR GOOD HEALTH

Primary care GAP

American medical students are less likely to pursue internal, family medicine

By Victoria Knight

Kaiser Health News

Despite hospital systems and health officials calling out the need for more primary care doctors, graduates of U.S. medical schools are becoming less likely to choose to specialize in one of those fields.

A record-high number of primary care positions was offered in the 2019 National Resident Matching Program — known to doctors as “the Match.” It determines what specialty a medical student will study after graduation. But this year, the percentage of primary care positions filled by fourth-year medical students was the lowest on record.

“I think part of it has to do with income,” said Mona Signer, the CEO of the Match. “Primary care specialties are not the highest paying.”

The three key primary care fields are internal medicine, family medicine and pediatrics. According to the 2019 Match report, 8,116 internal medicine positions were offered, the highest number on record and the most positions offered among any specialty, but only 41.5% were filled by seniors pursuing their M.D.s from U.S. medical schools. Similar trends were seen this year in family medicine and pediatrics.

In their final year of medical school, students apply and interview for residency programs in their chosen specialty. The Match, a nonprofit group, then assigns them a residency program based on how the applicant and the program ranked each other.

Since 2011, the percentage of U.S.-trained allopathic, or M.D., physicians who have matched into primary care positions has been on a decline, according to an analysis of historical Match data by Kaiser Health News.



But, over the same period, the percentage of U.S.-trained osteopathic and foreign-trained physicians matching into primary care roles has increased. 2019 marks the first year in which the percentage of osteopathic and foreign-trained doctors surpassed the percentage of U.S. trained medical doctors matching into primary care positions.

Medical colleges granting M.D. degrees graduate nearly three-quarters of U.S. students moving on to become doctors. The rest graduate from osteopathic schools, granting D.O. degrees. The five medical schools with the highest percentage of graduates who chose primary care are all osteopathic institutions, according to the latest U.S. News & World Report survey.

Beyond the standard medical curriculum, osteopathic students receive training in manipulative medicine, a hands-on technique focused on muscles and joints that can be used to diagnose and treat conditions. They are licensed by states and work side by side with M.D.s in physician practices and health systems.

Physicians who are trained at foreign medical schools, including both U.S. and non-U.S. citizens, also take unfilled primary care residency positions. In the 2019 match, 68.9% of foreign-trained physicians went into internal medicine, family medicine and pediatrics.

But, despite osteopathic graduates and foreign-trained medical doctors taking up these primary care spots, a looming primary care physician shortage is still expected.

The Association of American Medical Colleges predicts a shortage of between 21,100 and 55,200 primary care physicians by 2032. More doctors will be needed in the coming years to care for aging baby boomers, many of whom have multiple chronic conditions. The obesity rate is also increasing, which portends more people with chronic health problems.

KHN data correspondent Sydney Lupkin contributed to this report.

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