

Fewer medical students choose primary care

By Carla K. Johnson

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CHICAGO – Only 2 percent of graduating medical students say they plan to work in primary-care internal medicine, raising worries about a looming shortage of the first-stop doctors who used to be the backbone of the American medical system.

The results of a new national survey being published today suggest more medical students, many of them saddled with debt, are opting for more lucrative specialties. The survey of nearly 1,200 fourth-year students found just 2 percent planned to work in primary care internal medicine, according to results published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. In a similar survey in 1990, the figure was 9 per-cent.

Kirk Dignum, chief executive officer of Mercy Regional Medical Center, said Tuesday there is, indeed, a shortage of primary-care doctors.

“There is a national shortage and it’s getting worse and worse,”

Care:

La Plata County needs 5 more primary doctors

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Dignum said. "It's my understanding that more (new doctors) are opting for specialties."

A consultant hired by a community task force created after Valley-Wide Health Systems closed its Durango clinic in March 2007 found that La Plata County alone needs as many as five more primary-care doctors, Dignum said. The need for first-stop doctors in Archuleta and Montezuma counties would be in addition to the needs of La Plata County.

The community task force is trying to create a health-service district as per the recommendation of the consultant. One of the recommendations was to consider a health-service tax, an issue voters rejected in May 2006. The task force has not yet made recommendations.

On the national scene, paper-work, the demands of the chronically sick and the need to bring work home are among the factors pushing young doctors away from careers in primary care, the survey found.

"I didn't want to fight the insurance companies," said Dr. Jason Shipman, 36, a radiology resident at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville, Tenn., who is carrying \$150,000 in student debt.

Primary-care doctors he met as a student had to "speed to see enough patients to make a reasonable living," Shipman said.

Dr. Karen Hauer of the University of California, San Francisco, the study's lead author, said it's hard work taking care of the chronically ill, the elderly and people with complex diseases.

The salary gap may be another reason. More pay in a particular specialty tends to mean more U.S. medical school graduates fill residencies in those fields at teaching hospitals, Dr. Mark Ebell of the University of Georgia found in a separate study.

Family medicine had the lowest average salary last year, \$186,000, and the lowest share of residency slots filled by U.S. students, 42 percent. Orthopedic surgery paid \$436,000, and 94 percent of residency slots were filled by U.S. students.

Meanwhile, medical school is getting more expensive. The average graduate last year had \$140,000 in student debt, up nearly 8 percent from the previous year, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges.

Another likely factor: Medicare's fee schedule pays less for office visits than for simple procedures, according to the American College of Physicians, which reported in 2006 that the nation's primary-care system is "at grave risk of collapse."

Lower salaries in primary care did not deter Dr. Alexis Dunne of Chicago, who is 31 and carrying \$250,000 in student debt.

Last year, specialists couldn't solve the mystery of her mother's weight loss, fevers and severe anemia. Finally, an internist diagnosed a rare kidney infection. The kidney was removed, and Dunne's mother has felt fine since. Watching her mother go through the health crisis affirmed her decision to go into primary care. She also enjoys being "the point person" for her patients.

Herald Staff Writer Dale Rodebaugh contributed to this report.