



Society of Rural Physicians of Canada
Société de la médecine rurale du Canada

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Numbers Falling Again Says Rural Physician Chair

GOLDEN, BC / NOVEMBER 21, 2000/- A recent study by the Society of Rural Physicians shows that small communities in BC are losing doctors. The number of physicians in communities which qualify for the Northern and Isolation Allowance has decreased by 1.7% since June, and another 2% are planning to leave in the next 6 months.

The Northern and Isolation Allowance was developed 20 years ago to provide an incentive program to the smaller and more isolated of BC's rural communities. It attempted to generate an isolation index, where the most isolated receives a higher financial incentive. Since its implementation there was a steady increase in physician numbers until the late 1990s. Numbers have plateaued since 1998, and there has been an actual decline in the smallest communities. "We believe this is due to 2 factors" states Dr. Trina Larsen Soles, Chair of the SRPC-BC. "There is a worldwide doctor shortage which is noticed first in rural communities due to our historical difficulties in recruiting. The other factor is that recent developments in BC with the Prince George agreement have created a wide disparity in incentive packages available throughout the province, and the result is massive instability".

The numbers show that the NIA was working reasonably well for the smaller communities. Proposed settlements threaten to abandon the principles established with the program rather than attempting to expand them to cover more needy communities.

"The fact that rural doctor numbers are falling again is worrisome" said Dr. Larsen Soles. "The smallest communities in BC have the largest turnover of physicians. It doesn't take many doctors leaving to turn a small town where it is attractive to work into a sinking ship. A number of our northern communities are facing the possibility of losing most, if not all, of their physicians".

The optimism generated by the Rural Agreement last spring has been overwhelmed by recent events which threaten to make parts of BC the most difficult to supply with physicians in all of Canada. The SRPC-BC has been waiting for recommendations from the Mediation Panel, whose report was due last week. While we recognize that the complexity of the issues likely accounts for the delay, we are hoping the report will be released soon. Our members are tired and feel that every day which passes lessens the chance of a workable solution.

The SRPC-BC maintains a database of all physicians practicing in NIA communities. Data is updated every 4-6 months, and the most recent numbers are from June and October 2000.

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Contacts:

Dr. Trina Larsen Soles
250-344-2211