

HEALTH

Doctors sought for area

Nonprofit group working to lure more family physicians, ob/gyns

MARY LANE GALLAGHER
THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

A local nonprofit devoted to improving access to health care will work to recruit more primary-care doctors and obstetrician/gynecologists to Whatcom County in the coming months.

A recent survey of the county's physician workforce showed the greatest need for those two medical specialties, said Sue Sharpe, co-director of the Whatcom Alliance for Healthcare Access.

The alliance just hired a recruitment specialist who will work to help find doctors in those high-need areas, Sharpe said.

"Some (medical) practices have developed their own recruiting expertise, and a lot haven't," she said. "Our goal is to support those that have the resources and to also step in and take some leadership for those practices that don't have the resources."

The survey, conducted by the Small Business Development Center at Western Washington University, also found a high need for vascular and general surgery. But the alliance needs to study those two specialties and talk to those doctors more before devoting resources to recruiting more physicians, Sharpe said.

The Small Business Development Center will also work with the alliance to help encourage doctors to stay in the area by strengthening business practices. For example, a doctor in a high-need specialty with room for more patients could get marketing help, said Tom Door, the center's director.

The survey, last conducted in 2004, looked at the county's physician workforce in three ways. It compared the number of Whatcom County doctors to what the area should have based on population and productivity expectations. The alliance also convened a group of local experts to add what they knew about what was really going on in local medical practices – and which doctors were coming and going.

Family Care Network added five new family practice doctors this year, said David Lynch, vice president of the network.

"When we introduce new doctors," Lynch said, "they get busy quickly."

DOCTORS NEEDED

Whatcom Alliance for Healthcare Access will devote its recruiting resources to:

- Primary care physicians, such as family practice and internal medicine doctors.

Two other high-need areas that need more study:

- Vascular surgery.
- General surgery.

Other areas short of doctors:

- Nephrology (kidneys).
- Orthopedics.
- Urology.
- Psychiatry.

And the area's obstetricians probably didn't need a survey to tell them more doctors were needed to deliver babies.

The four obstetricians at Bellingham Obstetrics and Gynecology share on-call duties not only to deliver babies in their own practice, but to deliver some of the babies at the hospital for women who don't have an obstetrician of their own, said Rhonda Barrett, the practice's administrator.

The fewer OB's in the community, Barrett said, the more of those nonpractice calls each doctor gets.

The problem may soon get worse, she said, as two of the area's obstetricians will stop delivering babies by the end of the year. Some new family practice physicians are going to start delivering babies, though, she said.

The office isn't recruiting any new obstetricians, she said, and it would be tough if they were.

"Malpractice is very costly for OBs," she said. "It's one of the highest specialties for malpractice insurance premiums."

Reach Mary Lane Gallagher at 715-2285 or mary.gallagher@bellinghamherald.com.

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