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UNC Report warns of possible doctor shortage, but shows good news for other health fields

CHAPEL HILL – North Carolina may be facing a shortage of physicians in the not too distant future, due to declining physician growth rates over the past five years in the state. However, the number of nurse practitioners and physician assistants continues to rise, according to a study done at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The report, entitled *The North Carolina Health Professions 2004 Data Book* is by the Health Professions Data System at the Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research and is part of their annual review of the North Carolina health workforce.

The reason for the decrease is multifaceted. "We are seeing our uptake of physicians staying flat for the past four years while our population continues to grow," said Thomas Ricketts, Director of the Southeast Regional Center for Health Workforce Studies at UNC-CH and co-author of the report.

According to the report, while there was an increase in the total number of physicians from 17,090 in 2003 to 17,349 in 2004, the rate of growth in the total number of practicing physicians has continually declined since 2000. Between 1999-2000, the physician workforce grew 2.9%, but from 2003-2004, it grew only 1.5%. Relative to population, this translates to a growth of 1.5% from 1999-2000 and 0.6% from 2003-2004, indicating that physician growth is not keeping pace with the growth in population. The decline is among both general practitioners and specialists.

National groups, such as the Association of American Medical Colleges, have also signaled an impending shortage of physicians and recent experience supports this. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which displaced many physicians from their homes and practices, the recruitment of physicians

from the affected areas has been intense with many communities across the nation, both urban and rural, seeking to attract Gulf Coast physicians into practice.

While the growth rate for physician supply is slowing, the rate of growth for nurse practitioners (NPs) and physician assistants (PAs) is steadily rising. The increase from 1990-2004 is dramatic; the ratio of NPs and PAs per 10,000 population rose by 231% and 140% respectively, while the ratio of physicians per 10,000 population grew by only 26%. These practitioners do provide some of the same services as physicians and can fill some of the potential gaps in distribution.

Across other licensed healthcare professions in the State there were gains including: physical therapists, 7.4%; podiatrists, 6.4%; dental hygienists, 5.6%; dentists, 4.8%; chiropractors, 3.9%; physical therapy assistants, 2.6%; registered nurses, 1.7%; optometrists, 1.6% and pharmacists, 1.1%. Professions experiencing declining numbers in North Carolina were psychological associates, psychologists, certified nurse midwives and licensed practical nurses.

The North Carolina Health Professions 2004 Data Book was released on September 1, 2005, and contains county-level data for 17 licensed health professions. New to the system for the 2004 edition were respiratory therapists. For 27 years, the Sheps Center has produced the data book as an annual report on licensed health care professionals in North Carolina. Monitoring of the state's health professional supply is supported by the North Carolina Area Health Education Centers Program and the UNC Office of the Provost. Data for the report are provided by the individual health professions licensing boards.

Data are available in electronic format at the Sheps Center's Health Professions Data System website (www.shepscenter.unc.edu/hp). To order the 2004 edition, please contact nchp@unc.edu or (919) 966-7112.

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