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A primary concern

To improve bottom line, more doctors choosing specialties

By **LINDA A. LAMBERT**

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Evidence continues to mount that unless New York gets serious about investing in primary care, more Empire State residents with stomach pain, headaches and fevers will rely on emergency room treatment that is unnecessarily expensive and results in inferior care.

Why? Because fewer and fewer medical school graduates are choosing primary care fields, according to the latest in a number of reports that has found primary care languishing in comparison to specialty medicine.

A miniscule 2 percent of the nearly 1,200 fourth-year students surveyed from 11 U.S. medical schools — put another way, fewer than one in every 50 — plans to go into general internal medicine, a large research team reported in a recent issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association. Even more frightening is the precipitous drop from just 15 years ago, when one in 10 doctors was going into primary care internal medicine.

Moreover, only 5 percent of the 1,177 students surveyed intend to go into family medicine. That is about half of the national average for the last three years of medical school graduates. There's little evidence that this trend will reverse itself at any point soon.

While the study in JAMA observed national primary care physicians shortages, these bleak numbers shouldn't come as a surprise to New Yorkers. Nearly two years ago, the American College of Physicians, New York Chapter reported that only 17 of 62 New York counties had the recommended 50 percent of their physicians involved in primary care, and seven counties had upward of 2,000 patients per single primary care provider.

As both American College of Physicians and the JAMA article point out, the reasons for the primary care physician shortfall are myriad. They include longer hours, the substantial demands of the chronically ill and stacks of paperwork.

But this desperate situation begins and ends with money.

On average, a doctor in primary care in New York made \$142,000 in 2007, while a doctor in a non-primary care specialty made \$193,000, according to a recent report from the Center for Workforce Studies at the University at Albany. A plastic surgeon on average made \$224,000 in 2007.

When graduating doctors are offered an average income more than \$50,000 greater in a specialty field — and face an average of \$140,000 in debt — it's little wonder why young doctors are avoiding careers in primary care.

Gov. David Paterson, the state Health Department and the state Legislature deserve ample credit for taking the first steps to mitigate the situation with the "Doctors Across New York" program. It allocated \$15.6 million in loan forgiveness for medical students who choose to practice primary care in underserved areas like the Adirondacks and Western New York.

While it was an encouraging step, the Legislature failed to pass Gov. Paterson's proposed increase in funds for this program for the fiscal years 2009-2010, 2010-2011 and 2011-2012, undercutting the

effectiveness and viability of the program.

Critics will say that with the state facing enormous budget deficits, this is not the right time to invest in primary care. However, the opposite is actually the case.

Consider: Fewer than 20 percent of emergency room visits in New York involve a true medical emergency, according to numerous studies. The average cost of an emergency room visit in 2003 was \$560. Because many of these visits were made by Medicaid recipients, much of that cost was picked up by state taxpayers. By comparison, a visit to a primary care physician is less than half of that cost.

The greater number of primary care physicians available, the more New Yorkers will seek them for preventive care and aches and pains, instead of going to emergency rooms where costs are exorbitant. The savings to the state and taxpayers would be well into the hundreds of millions.

It is clear that what should be the backbone of New York's health care system is crumbling in no small part because of an inability to recruit new doctors to the primary care field. The investment in primary care will make for a healthier and stronger New York.

Linda A. Lambert is the executive director of the American College of Physicians, New York Chapter and a founding partner of the Primary Care Coalition.