



The Healthcare Pipeline: Primary Care Physician Shortage Starts with Undergraduate Students

Levy L*

Department of Public Health, University of California, Berkeley, USA

Editorial

When you think of going to the doctor, a visit to the cardiologist typically isn't the first stop that comes to mind. A primary care doctor is a much more natural first step, who will address your concerns and treat you before deciding if you need a referral to a specialist. Primary Care Physicians (PCP) come in the form of internal medicine, family medicine, and pediatricians and we don't have enough of them.

The PCP shortage is an issue with a greater scope than you'd think. And the pipeline starts with hopeful premeds like me. The COVID-19 pandemic spotlighted the healthcare field and created visibility into the day-to-day life of being a doctor. After several issues that were brought to light were investigated, it became clear that primary care physicians, those who are the backbone of our country's healthcare system, face some of the greatest challenges within medicine today, as evidenced by their burnout rates.

After learning of these difficulties through physician social media influencers, the conversations amongst premedical students shifted to discussing which specialty they wanted to pursue based on lifestyle. At my university campus alone, I have spoken to more than three dozen students who initially dreamed of being in primary care who are now shifting their path within medicine because of these revelations.

According to the Association of American Medical Colleges projections, this country could face a primary care physician shortage between 17,800 and 48,000 doctors by 2034; about when I would be finishing my residency. The average PCP has a patient list of 2,500, meaning up to 120 million Americans would not be able to access their doctor if this issue is not addressed soon. The main deterrents for going into primary care are administrative tasks, burnout, and salary. Administrative burdens are a primary source of burnout amongst primary care physicians. Internal medicine doctors report spending, on average, 18.7 h a week on paperwork. This workload contributes to increased stress as well as decreased work satisfaction and time for patient interaction. All of this paperwork eats into time spent with patients and gives doctors less time to do the job they actually enjoy and spent so long training for interestingly, the most paperwork intensive specialties are also the ones that have the lowest salaries on the medicine pay-ladder.

The average salary for physician's ranges from \$221,000 to \$526,000 a year, based on data provided by the 2022 Physician Compensation Report. Primary care physicians are in the lowest third pay brackets amongst all doctors. The most in-demand specialties, who do the most work, are the ones getting paid the least. Comparatively, specialties like plastic surgery make that \$526,000 number. To further this, in the past year specialists reported a pay increase of 15%. Whereas critical care doctors, the ones we rely on the most, saw an increase of just 1%.

People going into medicine have clear and pure intentions for doing so but it's almost naive to not consider salary when making decisions about the path of your career. With an average medical school debt of \$180,000, premedical students as well as medical students deciding on their residency are dissuaded from primary care by lower prestige, lower salary, and increased administrative burden. Most notably, this is exhibited by residency match statistics.

From the perspective of medical students who are choosing their residencies, data supports this primary care physician shortage stemming from this stage. According to the NRMP Match Report from 2022, there has been a decrease of U.S. medical school students matching into pediatrics, emergency medicine, and family medicine. This decrease is not due to an increase in competitiveness but because of lack of interest. Last year, of the family medicine positions offered, only 90.5% were filled — even though there had been the highest number of positions offered since 1992. For internal

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*Correspondence:

Lillian Levy, Department of Public Health, University of California, Berkeley, USA,

E-mail: liliclevy@berkeley.edu

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medicine, there were 9,380 positions open, the highest number ever, but only 95% were filled. But this does not mean all of those people want to go into internal medicine. It is especially important to note that people going into specialties like gastroenterology, nephrology, and oncology all begin with an internal medicine residency and then go to a fellowship within their desired field. The conditions are not set up to entice people to go into primary care. But this is a vicious cycle. The fewer people that go into these areas, the harder the work becomes for the doctors there currently, which drives fewer future doctors into that profession. You choose to go into medicine because

you want to help people, diagnose conditions, investigate the human body, and help your patients through their ailments. From that lens, a doctor is a person you bring yourself to for help in anything. Primary care is what you think of when you imagine a doctor. But as you go through medical school, you find that lifestyle and pay are simply better if you concentrate on one part of the body.

This needs to be addressed now, or there won't be anyone left for you to seek help from.