

US Medical School Enrollment Up 25% Since 2002

Megan Brooks | May 05, 2016

For the 2015-2016 academic year, medical school enrollment in the United States is up 25% over 2002-2003 levels, representing 4143 new students, with greater growth forecast, according to the latest figures from the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC).

The [results](#) of the 2015 Medical School Enrollment Survey were released May 5 at the AAMC's Health Workforce Research Conference in Chicago, Illinois. The survey of deans at US medical schools examines first-year medical school enrollment over the past decade and projects first-year enrollment through 2025.

In 2006, in response to concerns of a looming physician shortage, the AAMC recommended a 30% increase in first-year medical school enrollment by the 2015-2016 academic year (over 2002-2003 levels).

According to the latest report, medical schools have expanded enrollment by 25% over the 2002 level, just short of the AAMC's 30% goal. But the report predicts first-year US medical school enrollment will reach 21,434 students — an increase of 4946 students — by 2017-2018, which would be a 30% increase over the 2002-2003 baseline enrollment level of 16,488 students.

"Our nation's medical schools have stepped up to meet the challenge the AAMC put before them in 2006," AAMC President and CEO Darrell G. Kirch, MD, said in a news release. "They understand the integral role they play in meeting the future health workforce needs of this country which, according to our latest data, will now require up to an additional 94,700 physicians by 2025."

The report also notes that since 2002, 20 additional medical schools have been established, accounting for 37% of the overall estimated growth by 2020-2021. In addition, seven new schools are currently awaiting accreditation.

Residency Slots Remains Top Concern

In addition to an uptick in US schools granting medical degrees, colleges of osteopathic medicine are also experiencing unprecedented growth, according to the report. First-year enrollment at DO-granting schools in 2020-2021 is expected to reach 8468, an 185% increase from 2968 students in 2002-2003. Combined first-year enrollment at existing MD-granting and DO-granting medical schools is projected to reach 30,186 students by 2020-2021, an increase of 55% compared with 2002-2003, the report says.

The report also shows that medical schools are increasing diversity in their student body and increasing student interest in caring for underserved populations.

Eighty-four percent of schools indicated that they had or were planning to have specific admission programs or policies designed to recruit a diverse student body "interested in caring for underserved populations," according to the news release. The majority of respondents had established or expected programs/policies geared toward minorities underrepresented in medicine, students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and students from rural and underserved communities, the report notes.

The availability of training positions or sites for their students remains a chief concern among US medical school deans. According to the report, 50% reported concerns about their own incoming students' ability to find residency positions of their choice after medical school, up from 35% in 2012, and 85% expressed concern about the number of clinical sites for clerkships.

"Medical schools have been doing their part to expand enrollment, but residencies have not been growing at the same

pace," Janis Orlowski, MD, AAMC chief healthcare officer, told *Medscape Medical News*.

"This has major implications for the country because by 2025 we will need approximately 95,000 more doctors than we have today, and all medical school graduates must complete residency training in order to become practicing physicians. While teaching hospitals have historically expanded the number of first-year residency positions at a rate of slightly less than 1% a year, federal cuts to teaching hospital payments may jeopardize further expansion or could even lead some programs to close," Dr Orlowski said.

Dr Kirch added in the release, "Congress can't afford to delay any longer. They must act now to ensure that patients will have access to the care they need when they need it."

Dr Orlowski said the AAMC "advocates for a multipronged approach that includes continued progress in care delivery innovations, greater use of technology, and efficient use of all health professionals on the care team — areas where medical schools and teaching hospitals have been leading already. However, there must also be a modest increase in federal support for physician training. Lifting the two-decade old cap on Medicare support for residency training would enable teaching hospitals across the country to begin expanding their training programs immediately."

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