



Topic Brief: Medical Degree Utility

Date: 10/6/2023

Nomination Number: 1064

Purpose: This document summarizes the information addressing a [topic nomination](#) submitted on August 27, 2023, through the Effective Health Care Website. This information was used to inform the Evidence-based Practice Center (EPC) Program decisions about whether to produce an evidence report on the topic, and if so, what type of evidence report would be most suitable.

Issue: The nominator seeks to understand how many years on average graduates of medical degree programs ultimately spend in clinical practice instead of in the public health sector. The nominator's primary concern is the present shortage of doctors in the United States, and how it may be impacted by people acquiring medical degrees but foregoing clinical practice.

Findings: The EPC program will not create an evidence product for this topic because primary research falls outside of the program's scope. In addition, the nominator's concern regarding physician career focus and length of practice does not correlate with primary causes that have been identified for the current physician workforce shortage in the United States. Therefore, an evidence report about this subject would not meet the program's criteria for importance.

Background

The shortage of physicians in the United States is currently impacting the healthcare landscape and is expected to become increasingly burdensome in the coming decade. A 2021 report from the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) projected that physician supply will increase modestly between 2019 and 2034, but by 2034 demand for physicians will still exceed supply by roughly 37,800 to 124,000 full-time equivalent physicians.¹ In 2020, the American Medical Association Masterfile noted that there were over 818,000 physicians involved in direct patient care, and nearly 145,000 in residency training. That dataset also found that almost 202,000 physicians were inactive or semi-retired, and only 43,000 physicians were spending more time in administrative, teaching, or research roles.²

Reasons for the United States' physician shortage are varied, but research points to a few main root causes, including: the duration, cost, and availability of medical and post-graduate training (especially the lack of sufficient funding expansion for residency positions from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services); the demographic shift occurring as a disproportionate number of Americans enter the 65 and up age range, requiring more medical care; demographic shifts away from urban centers as part of the COVID-19 pandemic; and physician retirement due to age and/or burnout.^{2, 3}

In spring of this year, the United States House of Representatives and Senate each introduced bipartisan legislation called the Resident Physician Shortage Reduction Act of 2023, which would gradually expand the number of Medicare-supported medical residency positions by 14,000 over seven years if passed.⁴ The bill was enthusiastically endorsed by the AAMC and applauded by other groups, including the College of American Pathologists⁵ and the American Hospital Association.⁶ As of October 4, 2023, this legislation has not yet passed in the Senate.⁷

Assessment Methods

We assessed nomination for priority for a systematic review or other AHRQ EHC report with a hierarchical process using established selection criteria. Assessment of each criteria determined the need to evaluate the next one.

1. Determine the *appropriateness* of the nominated topic for inclusion in the EHC program.
2. Establish the overall *importance* of a potential topic as representing a health or healthcare issue in the United States.
3. Determine the *desirability of new evidence review* by examining whether a new systematic review or other AHRQ product would be duplicative.
4. Assess the *potential impact* a new systematic review or other AHRQ product.
5. Assess whether the *current state of the evidence* allows for a systematic review or other AHRQ product (feasibility).
6. Determine the *potential value* of a new systematic review or other AHRQ product.

Related Resources

We identified additional information during our assessment that might be useful.

- The AAMC releases an annual Physician Specialty Data Report, which provides detailed statistics about active physicians and physicians in training, and may be of interest to the nominator: [2022 Physician Specialty Data Report Executive Summary](#).

References

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Conflict of Interest: None of the investigators have any affiliations or financial involvement that conflicts with the material presented in this report.

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