

Caring for Residents on the Coast: Change is in the Works!

Desperate emails, handwritten letters, and social media posts pleading for help in finding a family physician are on the rise, most recently with many people searching for a doctor to care for their elderly parents.

In a word, it's heartbreaking. Our physicians are doing everything they can to provide care to everyone in need on the Sunshine Coast but it's a case of too few doctors caring for a growing number of patients, many with complex care needs.

And elder care is not the only aspect of health care that's in crisis on the Coast. There's a shortage of doctors in the ER – Sechelt Hospital now has longer waits as there is only one physician per shift, down from two per shift last year. There's a shortage of psychiatrists so the wait for mental health care is a lengthy one. And there's a well documented shortage of family physicians. All of this is stressful for everyone: for patients and their loved ones, for our doctors and their front-office staff.

Amidst all of these challenges, there are initiatives underway that we hope will result in more physicians moving to the Coast – and staying.

1. New Payment Model

The BC Government launched a new payment model which boosts the fees paid to family physicians and ensures they will be paid for all aspects of care. It will also reduce the administrative burdens on our doctors, freeing up their time for more patient care.

This is good news on so many fronts. It will help us to retain doctors in our region, with fewer being tempted to move to provinces such as Ontario, which used to have better compensation for physicians. The new BC payment model will help our recruitment drive, catching the attention of physicians across Canada.

2. New Recruitment Initiatives

In the last six months, we've dramatically increased our investment in recruiting new doctors. Our team is working closely with physician recruiters at Vancouver Coastal Health and Health Match BC, the government agency which recruits doctors, nurses, and allied health professionals from across Canada and around the world. We're also collaborating with other Divisions to maximize our reach to qualified physicians.

The Sunshine Coast has had a great deal of success in attracting doctors who have completed medical school outside of Canada: over 50% of all family physicians on the Coast are international medical graduates.

We hope that this investment will start to pay off soon and we'll be able to share some good news shortly.

3. New Retention Commitments

The Division is doing whatever we can to support physicians currently on the Coast. Sometimes it's the little things that count. With financial support from the Medical Staff Association at Sechelt Hospital, our team now stocks the kitchen in the physicians' lounge at the hospital with locally purchased meals, snacks, and drinks to support them while they're putting in superhuman hours e.g. one physician's 17-hour shift in the ER in addition to his outstanding work as a family physician in a local clinic.

We're also supporting a variety of new physician wellness events, advocating for them with stakeholders and the government, and trying to show them how much we all appreciate the care that they provide.

Interim Support

Unfortunately, all of these initiatives will take time to produce results while people need care now. With limited resources, we need to consider all stopgap measures.

For example, we have excellent pharmacists and other health care providers on the Coast. Perhaps they can assist with some issues that used to be taken care of by a family doctor.

Need a prescription renewed? Contact your local pharmacist. This spring, they'll be able to prescribe medications for minor ailments like urinary tract infections, allergies, acne and indigestion, as well as contraception. [B.C. pharmacists granted limited prescribing powers under new health plan | CBC News](#)

There are also services on the Coast that can provide foot and wound care for people with diabetes, for example. Check out FETCH (www.sc.fetchbc.ca) for a complete list of options.

Consider calling HealthLink BC at 811. It's a free provincial health information and advice phone line available 24 hours a day. You can speak with a health service navigator who can help you find health information and services; or they can connect you directly to a registered nurse, a registered dietitian, a qualified exercise professional, or a pharmacist.

Registered nurses are available 24/7 at HealthLink BC to help you with non-emergency health concerns, to discuss symptoms and procedures, and to recommend whether you should see a health care provider in person.

Pharmacists are also on hand at 811 to answer your medication questions when your community pharmacist may be unavailable—every night from 5:00 pm to 9:00 am.

We recognize that these services don't replace a family physician, but until there are more doctors moving to the Coast, we need to explore all options.

Challenging Headwinds

There are some demographic trends that make health care on the Coast more challenging than before, namely:

- **Retirement:** Almost 23% of family physicians currently practising on the Coast graduated from medical school over 33 years ago. Many of them are considering retirement or scaling back their hours. The good news is that some who have retired, such as Dr. Karen Forgie, continue to work in our hospital or as a locum to provide coverage when full-time family physicians need time off.
- **Growing Population:** More people continue to move to the Sunshine Coast. If you've moved here recently from the Fraser Valley, Lower Mainland or Vancouver Island, we strongly encourage you to keep your family doctor at your previous address.
- **Aging Population:** The Sunshine Coast has one of the highest percentages of seniors in the province. We need to pull together as a community to support them in any way we can. We've been very fortunate to have Dr. John Sloan provide in-home care for frail elderly patients on the Coast. Many of our family physicians on the Coast also do house calls for their elderly patients.

A key change that will improve patient access to care is the development of a provincially supported Primary Care Network (PCN) on the Coast.

In a PCN, family physicians and nurse practitioners, nursing and allied health providers, health and community organizations work together to provide care services to people in a geographical community. We'll be sure to keep you up-to-date on our PCN progress.

On behalf of all the physicians on the Sunshine Coast, thank you for your patience, support, and understanding. Working together, we will get through these challenging times, and emerge stronger – and healthier – than before.

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