



Shortage of Endocrinologists in the United States

By Mayu Mishina



The anecdotal experience of patients having to wait 3–9 months to see a medical specialist has basis in truth when it comes to endocrinologists. According to an editorial by Andrew F. Stewart, M.D., chief of the division of endocrinology at the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine, U.S. demand for clinical endocrinologists far exceeds their availability and even their existence. The commentary, “The U.S. Endocrinology Workforce: A Supply-Demand Mismatch,”* suggests that the imbalance could burgeon in the next decade if it is not corrected.

“In our hospital system, the demand for endocrine services is continuous. As I read about this and talked to people, I realized this is not just a local, but a national phenomenon,” Dr. Stewart explains. He adds

that the shortage may well be international, noting that several countries have approached the University

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of Pittsburgh’s hospital system, in Pennsylvania, to develop telemedicine in diabetes management.

Though exact figures are hard to come by, Dr. Stewart estimates that as many as 10,000 positions are available nationally for clinically trained M.D. endocrinologists. Openings exist at hospitals, private practices, academic

medical centers, and in the pharmaceutical industry. The American Board of Internal Medicine (ABIM), however, recorded only 5,341 board-certified endocrinologists in 2006.

Worse Ahead

The situation appears starker when considering the number of Americans whose medical or health conditions may soon require the services of an endocrinologist. Approximately 20 million patients have diabetes, for example. Another 12 million suffer from osteoporosis and 12 million have thyroid nodules/cancer. This does not account for the many other U.S. populations that could benefit from the care of an endocrinologist, including the nearly 150 million Americans who are obese or overweight, postmenopausal women, and individuals with metabolic syndrome, pituitary disease, adrenal disease, or reproductive disorders. Given that about 1,500 of the ABIM-certified

endocrinologists work in areas other than direct patient care (i.e., research, teaching, or the pharmaceutical industry), only about 4,000 endocrinologists are actually treating the 25–100 million patients who may require such specialized care.

Contributing Factors

How did the endocrinologist shortage come about? Dr. Stewart cites two primary factors: low endocrinology pay and cumbersome regulatory burdens of endocrinology fellowships. According to him, remuneration in the field has historically been poor compared to other medical specialties. He notes that the average endocrine salary 5 years ago ranged from \$120,000 to \$150,000 a year. The average debt of a medical student, meanwhile, runs close to \$200,000.

“There’s immense pressure on



graduating residents to cover their debts, no matter what their philanthropic fantasies might be," Dr. Stewart says. "You could do dermatology for \$400,000 or \$500,000 a year with no nights or weekends, or you could do endocrinology. Unless you're dying to do endocrinology, you'd be crazy to."

Fellowship Burden

Meanwhile, endocrinology fellowships pose a "huge" regulatory burden for the hospitals that fund them, says Dr. Stewart. Between the increasing pressures on hospitals to cut costs and the regulatory burdens of maintaining an endocrinology fellowship, he notes that hospitals have no incentive to offer them. The result: fewer training programs in clinical endocrinology exist now than just a decade ago. According to ABIM and the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education, there are currently 122 accredited M.D. endocrinology fellowships in the country. In 1996, there were 140.

Proposed Actions

The fact that many of the diseases requiring the care of an endocrinologist—diabetes, obesity, osteoporosis, thyroid cancer—appear to be increasing will only heighten the supply-demand imbalance in coming years, and the number of endocrine specialists graduating each year does little to alter the shortage. An average of 200 people pass the ABIM Endocrinology, Diabetes, and Metabolism boards each year, but an estimated 20% ultimately leave the country, meaning that only 160 or so new endocrinologists enter the U.S. workforce each year.

"The answers are complicated: even if you doubled the number of endocrinologists, you still won't have enough to provide care [to all who need it]," Dr. Stewart observes. He nevertheless proposes several approaches to begin solving the problem. First, he urges efforts to advertise the endocrinologist shortage to the public and the government. Among his other proposals:

- Require hospitals with endocrinology training programs to fund clinical fellowship training slots.
- Streamline the accreditation and management of endocrine fellowships.
- Increase public health programs in diabetes and obesity prevention while training internists, family practitioners, nurse practitioners, and related medical personnel in diabetes and obesity prevention.
- Provide waiver visas for international medical graduates to practice endocrinology in the United States.
- Provide third-party payment for telemedicine services to underserved areas that lack an endocrinologist.

"The main message here is really a political one," Dr. Stewart says. "Obesity, diabetes, metabolic syndrome

—they're the bubonic plague, the HIV of our time, and as a nation we've failed to address that. Now people with diabetes and other disorders simply don't have access to high-level care. To me, this is an issue of national health policy. It's an epidemic that we've completely ignored." ■

* Stewart AF: The US Endocrinology Workforce: A Supply-Demand Mismatch. *J Clin Endocrinol Metab*, April 2008.

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Physicians in the United States

Physicians and surgeons held about 813,560 U.S. jobs in 2006, according to the latest data from the American Medical Association's *Physician Characteristics and Distribution in the US*. Of the total, primary care physicians accounted for 45.3% and within this group, 43.0% were in internal medicine. Endocrinologists numbered 5,074, accounting for only 0.6% of all active physicians.

