

GAO Report on Primary Care Physician Trends - Number of Primary Care Doctors is Down

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WASHINGTON - Fewer American doctors are focusing on primary care, but the decline is being covered by physicians from other countries. The General Accountability Office said Tuesday that as of 2006 there were 22,146 American doctors in residency programs in the United States specializing in primary care.

That was down from 23,801 in 1995, the research arm of Congress told the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee.

"It is troubling to me that the number of Americans pursuing a career in primary care has declined," said Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt.

Overall growth in the number of primary-care physicians "has been totally due to the number of international medical students training in America," Sanders said. "We are increasingly dependent on international medical school graduates to meet our needs. Currently, one in four new physicians in the U.S. is an international medical graduate."

In its report on primary-care providers, GAO said the number of international medical graduates training in primary care had grown from 13,025 in 1995 to 15,565 in 2006.

For specialists, the number of Americans in training went from 45,300 in 1995 to 47,575 in 2006 and over the same period international specialists grew from 11,957 to 12,611, GAO said.

"There are simply not enough primary-care providers now and the situation will become far worse in the future unless we do something," Sanders said. He urged doubling funds for the National Health Service Corps to \$250 million next year.

The service corps offers scholarships to students dedicated to practicing primary care in communities of greatest need. In return for scholarship support, they must agree to practice in communities where need is the greatest.

"Part of the solution lies in making medical, dental and nursing education affordable for all Americans," Sanders said.