

Medical school foundation says it's bringing doctors home to NB

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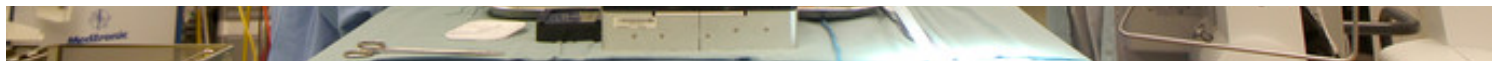
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Surgeons operate on a patient at the Saint John Regional Hospital.
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FREDERICTON • While the New Brunswick government searches for ways to bring more physicians to the province, one doctor says the solution already is in place and working – a scholarship-based, medical education fund which the province has largely ignored.

Dr. Don Craig, a retired Saint John physician and chairman of the New Brunswick Medical Education Foundation, said the provincial government should get out of physician recruitment since it has not been effective and at least 50,000 people are still without a family doctor.

Craig said the medical education foundation, in place since 2010, is designed to secure New Brunswick doctors through annual scholarships which commit future physicians to practising in the province.

“I have 50 medical students who have signed on the dotted line to come back to practise medicine in their home province of New Brunswick,” Craig said in an interview Monday.

“In their 2014 platform, the Liberals said they had a \$12-million budget set aside to bring 50 doctors to this province by 2018. I had a meeting with (Health Minister) Victor Boudreau after they got elected and at that time I had 40 docs signed to come back. I told him instead of spending \$12 million, which is not working, put your investment into our program. Give us \$1 million a year for four years, then stop, and we will look after the majority of your recruitment problems for this province.”

The foundation has raised close to \$6 million from individual, corporate and municipal sponsors, but it originally hoped to have matching funds from the province and the federal government – money that has not materialized.

“This province sponsors about 75 medical students every year in all four years of undergraduate school,” Craig said. “We have 32 in Saint John, 24 in Moncton, 10 in Memorial and the rest spread across Ottawa, Laval and McGill. It costs you and I as taxpayers about \$700,000 to educate a family doctor and about \$1 million for a specialist. But we are not getting enough of our students back home . . . We think with our program, we can get it up as high as an 85 per cent return.”

Boudreau and Dr. John Whelan, president of the New Brunswick Medical Society, said last week they are counting on the Saint John medical school to boost the number of general practitioners in the province, but there are concerns about attracting needed specialists.

Boudreau said there has been a net gain of 16 physicians in New Brunswick since the Liberals came to power in 2016 – still far short of the 50 promised by 2018.

He said the health department is in talks with the medical society “looking at different compensation models that might make it a little more attractive for specialists.”

Craig said the government is approaching recruitment from the wrong end, when students are on the verge of completing medical school or residencies.

He said the provincial government dangles grants worth \$30,000 to \$50,000 in front of prospective doctors, in exchange for which the typical physician will promise to commit three years of practice to New Brunswick.

“If they leave after that (and they often do), the money is lost, the continuity of care for patients is also lost, and New Brunswick is no further ahead.”

Craig said that in the foundation’s first year, it awarded three scholarships totalling \$25,000. Those three students, the first of the graduates with foundation scholarships, all are practising in New Brunswick.

“This last year, 37 scholarships to the tune of \$281,000, were given out,” he said.

“So far, We have given out over \$1.3 million to our medical students, all with the vision of bringing them home to work.”

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