

Ontario champions international medical graduates

Ontario leads the country in number of positions available and support for international medical graduates (IMGs). The province continues to offer more IMG positions each year than all the other provinces combined.

“Our government is investing record amounts of funding in IMGs, making Ontario the leader in Canada when it comes to providing support for their assessment and training,” said Health and Long-Term Care Minister George Smitherman at a gathering to recognize and celebrate the contributions foreign-trained doctors are making to Ontario’s health care system.

“Foreign-trained doctors are an important – indeed an essential – way to supplement our supply of doctors, particularly in areas where they are most needed,” said the Minister at the event, held last summer.

The gala ceremony was hosted by the Premier of Ontario and the Minister, and included a networking luncheon with 30 Members of Provincial Parliament (MPPs). Smitherman thanked the more than 200 IMGs who have brought their skills, training, compassion, and expertise to Ontario. He also thanked Ontario’s medical schools for their support in preparing and training IMGs, as well as IMG-Ontario and the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario.

In 2006/07, the Ministry is expected to invest

\$53 million to support the more than 500 IMGs in all levels of training and assessment. Since taking office, the current government has more than tripled the amount of funding to support IMG programs.

Notably, the number of training and assessment positions for IMGs was boosted from 90 to 200 in 2004. Since then, more progress has been made, including:

- Over 3,800 applications from IMGs seeking positions in Ontario were processed through the unique IMG-Ontario office.
- More than 2,100 IMGs were provided the opportunity to take a clinical skills exam to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.
- A total of 539 new training and assessment positions were offered to IMGs, 218 of these in

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Premier Dalton McGuinty, Hon. Mike Colle, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration, Hon. George Smitherman, Minister of Health and Long-Term Care, Dr. Joshua Tepper, Assistant Deputy Minister of Health Human Resources, and IMG spokesperson Elena Sourovtsseva, meet with IMGs from across Ontario.

2006, exceeding the annual target goal of 200 for the first time.

“Since 2001, we’ve made significant progress in getting more and more highly skilled and qualified individuals the training and assessment they need to get into practice in Ontario,” says Dr. Joshua Tepper, Assistant Deputy Minister, Health

Human Resources, Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care. “We’re committed to IMGs, and we’re putting significant resources into our commitment, constantly working on new ways to streamline the process.”

Over the past few years, the health system’s ability to accommodate IMGs has grown exponentially. “The government’s IMG initiative has succeeded in removing barriers and getting increasing numbers of qualified IMGs into practice,” says Dr. John Kelton, Dean and Vice-President, Faculty of Health Sciences, McMaster University.

“The situation is strikingly different than it was five years ago. It’s really a good news story; Ontario has essentially added the capacity equal to a new medical school. IMGs are better able to make the most of their abilities, and Ontarians benefit by

having increased access to care.”

At the IMG recognition ceremony, Premier Dalton McGuinty acknowledged that there have been numerous challenges to practicing in Ontario in the past for IMGs. “You’ve had to face too many barriers to pursue your career here. That’s why our government is working to bring down the barriers that prevent new Canadians from pursuing the careers they’re qualified and trained to do.

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“Choosing to work in Ontario is a sign of your commitment to a strong, universal public health care system,” said McGuinty. “It’s also a choice that will benefit all Ontarians, because when more graduates choose to train in medicine here, that means more doctors working in Ontario. Across our province, there are communities that desperately need more doctors. Your skills are needed here.”

IMGs play an important role in Ontario’s ongoing recruitment of physicians. They comprise a significant portion of practicing physicians in Ontario.



More than 200 international medical graduates gathered for a formal recognition ceremony hosted by the Premier of Ontario and the Minister of Health and Long-Term Care in the Great Hall of Hart House, University of Toronto, last summer.

Unique access centre supports internationally educated health professionals

A new access centre for internationally educated health professionals, the first of its kind in Canada, will provide interactive support to individuals educated abroad seeking to practise in Ontario.

The initiative is a key component of HealthForceOntario (HFO), an innovative and collaborative multi-year plan to give Ontario the right number and mix of health care providers to meet health needs.

“We created HealthForceOntario to increase the number of nurses, doctors, and other health professionals in this province,” said Minister of Health and Long-Term Care George Smitherman in a speech to the Economic Club last fall. “Examples of this innovation and leadership can be found as we establish a one-stop shop for internationally educated health professionals and a marketing and recruitment centre that arms us to compete.”

The Access Centre for Internationally Educated Health Professionals (ACIEHP) which has an

office in downtown Toronto provides a single point of access for comprehensive information, resources, and counseling for Internationally Educated Health Professionals who want to practise in this province.

“Our goal is to remove barriers to individuals who wish to establish their health care careers here,” says Wayne Oake, Director, Access Centre for Internationally Educated Health Professionals. “The centre is accessible online, by phone, and in person. Our knowledgeable staff provides not just written resource material

but counseling and support for decision making.”

Specifically, the Access Centre for Internationally Educated Health Professionals offers:

- Contact information and referrals to the regulatory body in the appropriate field of expertise
- Links to education and assessment programs to provide timely access to the best services available, as close to home as possible
- Information about standards for professional qualifications, licensing and registration processes, and alternative professional options that complement skills, internships

and mentorships

- Information and referrals for retraining
- Ongoing counselling and support to assist in finding the most effective path to professional practice

The Access Centre for Internationally Educated Health Professionals was recently launched in partnership with the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration’s Global Experience Ontario program, which provides similar services and resources for foreign-trained professionals in non-health related fields. The Access Centre for Internationally Educated Health Professionals will continue to work closely with key stakeholders, such as regulatory bodies, professional and IEHP associations, and bridging programs to ensure its success.

The Access Centre for Internationally Educated Health Professionals and its partner HFO Recruitment Centre are supported by a comprehensive web site as well as an employment portal that provides province-wide job listings for physicians and nursing and which will be expanded to include other health care professionals in the future.

For more information, go to www.healthforceontario.ca/Jobs/AccessCentre.aspx

Quick Facts

- To date, 540 IMGs have signed agreements to provide service in underserved communities. Of these, 104 are currently working in those communities and the remainder will begin providing service throughout the province over the coming months and years.
- Since 2004, 539 new training and assessment positions have been offered to IMGs, 218 of these in 2006, exceeding the annual goal of 200.
- In 2005, 39% of the medical licenses issued in Ontario went to IMGs, double the number from 10 years ago.

Resident matching service expands for IMGs in 2007

For the first time, as of March 2007, international medical graduates (IMGs) will be able to compete for entry-level postgraduate positions in all Canadian medical schools through the first round of an annual national match for dedicated IMG positions.

There are two match rounds, called iterations, organized through the Canadian Resident Matching Service (CaRMS) by way of an electronic application service and a computer match. The goal is to help applicants decide where to train and help program directors decide which applicants they wish to enroll in postgraduate medical training. Unmatched candidates from the first iteration can go on to compete in a second iteration.

"This change means increased access to training positions for IMGs who are Canadian citizens or permanent residents who are both living in Ontario and training abroad," says Dr. Sarita Verma, Vice Dean, Post Graduate Education, Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto. "Not only does it simplify the application process, it includes access to over 140 dedicated positions across 20 different specialties."

The competition for IMG positions will be administered in the same way that it is for Canadian medical graduates, improving both transparency and access for IMGs. These positions are offered in exchange for a five-year commitment to provide medical service in an approved under-served community in Ontario.

Until this change went into effect, IMGs were only able to access entry-level residency training positions through IMG-Ontario, an organization dedicated to providing information and evaluation services for IMGs.

"This is a competitive process. We encourage all IMGs to do all they can to enhance their portfolios," says Verma. "This includes the opportunity to participate in a standardized evaluation through IMG-Ontario."

Reducing barriers and increasing access to training positions for qualified IMGs is an important part of the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care's commitment to improving access to health care services across the province and ensuring that there are more doctors in Ontario.

The Ministry will continue to guarantee that there are at least as many available residency positions for Canadian medical school graduates as there are graduates from Ontario medical schools.

For more information, go to www.carms.ca.

From Russia to Niagara: The IMG perspective

It was the need for a safe and secure future that prompted Elena Sourovtsseva and her husband Vadim Kovalev to leave Russia and start a new life in Canada.

Sourovtsseva, a pediatrician, and Kovalev were overwhelmed by the crime rate, murders, and instability in their homeland. A run-in with a violent drug dealer in what was considered to be a secure condominium building, plus the murder of their best friend's daughter in a similar location, was the turning point.

"We decided that it's not really safe to stay in the country for the future of our children and ourselves," says Sourovtsseva.

Originally from Saratov, a city 800 km south of Moscow, Sourovtsseva completed her medical school training there in 1994, followed by a PhD in Moscow in hemolytic uremic syndrome. She was the youngest PhD recipient ever at her medical school. Her husband was a national forensic medical expert.

"He was raised on English and Canadian literature and culture, so he really fell in love with Canada. I shared this love with him. We ended up applying to immigrate to Canada only," she says.

After each applied independently, her husband's application was accepted, though hers was turned down. They immigrated in 1999, settling in Windsor. He currently works in cytology/pathology as a technologist, not a physician.

While her husband worked, Sourovtsseva went back to school, completing an Honours Bachelor of Commerce at the University of Windsor and a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) through a joint University of Windsor/University of Toronto Rotman School of Management program. She did her MBA co-op, and was subsequently offered a position, at the Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre in Toronto.

She quickly became aware that implementing health care changes was a slow process. "On the other hand, being in medicine and being able to help people now would give me this urge to feel that I've done something today, helped somebody today. That's what I feel my personal mission is."

In 2002, Sourovtsseva applied to an IMG-Ontario pilot program but was not successful in securing a position that year. Not wanting to give up, she wrote the U.S. and Canadian medical licensing exams. She was accepted to a residency program in Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 2004 just as Ontario opened up additional IMG positions. This time she was accepted into a position in Ontario and opted to stay in Canada.

Sourovtsseva completed the full family medicine residency program at the University of Western Ontario in 2006 to secure a full, unrestricted licence. During that period she also got involved with the

Professional Association of Internes and Residents of Ontario (PAIRO), serving on the board of directors and advocating on behalf of IMGs.

In return for her training in family medicine, Sourovtsseva signed a contract with the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care to provide five years of service in an underserved community in Ontario. Wanting to stay close to Toronto to experience

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the culture and be near the largest Russian community in Canada, she and her husband chose to live in Oakville. Sourovtsseva then set her sights on the unique hospitalist program at the Niagara Health System (NHS) that

offered opportunities to help patients not only in hospital but in the community.

Sourovtsseva started at NHS in August 2006. "I can do acute care in the hospital and run follow-up clinics with patients who don't have family physicians," says Sourovtsseva. "It fills my needs in terms of what I want to accomplish."

The hospitalist program director has also



supported Sourovtsseva in the use of her MBA and leadership skills to improve the program from a utilization and quality care point of view.

Rotating around the various sites of the NHS enables her to see a variety of patients and offers constant learning and skill advancement, she says. In addition to honing her skills in palliative care, Sourovtsseva has been very active in the community, volunteering to help Canadian families adopt children from abroad.

"There have been tremendous changes within the last two years in the IMG process in Ontario," says Sourovtsseva, reflecting on her experience. "It's much easier to get into a residency program than it was before. We have different streams, we have different programs. It is a matter of perseverance and making your decision."

While there are numerous challenges to making a new life in a different country, she says it's worth it. "I'm happy and my life is much more balanced. It's what I dreamed about. And I'm living in the best country in the world. I think it was the best decision of our lives to immigrate to Canada."

Niagara Health System IMG experience

IMG recruitment helps to alleviate shortages in anaesthesia surgery

When Joan Hatcher joined the Niagara Health System (NHS) in 2001 as a specialist physician recruiter, she considered the options and decided that international medical graduates (IMGs) would be a valuable resource in helping to alleviate staffing shortages. At the time, the Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care's IMG program was just being introduced.

Since then, Hatcher has recruited 84 specialists, 40% of whom are IMGs. "They kind of form the backbone of our new staff and have just been phenomenal," says Hatcher. "They're people who come in and they bring you all kinds of experience."

The NHS is Ontario's largest multi-site hospital amalgamation comprised of six hospital sites (including Welland, St. Catharines, and Niagara Falls) and an ambulatory care centre serving 434,000 residents across the 12 municipalities making up the Regional Municipality of Niagara.

The IMGs currently practising at NHS work in areas such as anesthesia, medicine, surgery, psychiatry, and pediatrics. They come from countries that include Egypt, India, Libya, South America, Liberia, South Africa, Romania, and Russia.

Hatcher says that many IMGs settle in the communities with their families and bring incredible stories of their homelands. They bring outstanding clinical skills to the community and demonstrate maturity and a tremendous work ethic. IMGs bring "a whole new dimension to our medical staff," says Hatcher.

Because IMGs are such a welcome addition to the community, retention is a priority, says Hatcher. Many of the IMGs Hatcher recruits are completing up to five years of service in an underserved community in return for the training they have received. The Niagara Health System takes seriously its responsibility to welcome and integrate these individuals. "We want them to be happy and to stay here when the return of service is done."

IMGs are offered interest-free loans when they arrive, and partake of social gatherings to meet their IMG colleagues. Hatcher provides support and serves as a resource for personal and professional issues. She notes that individual medical departments also play a huge role in facilitating the entry of IMGs to the health care team.

The biggest challenge for IMGs is adjusting to a new style of medical practice, says Hatcher. Many IMGs may find themselves in different clinical settings and positions than they experienced in other countries. As well, they may have to adapt to different practice features unique to Ontario.

"The IMG experience has been very positive," says Dr. Mark Jany, Chief of Medicine in the Department of Medicine at NHS. "In medicine all of the IMGs did a vigorous six-month mini-residency at a teaching centre prior to coming to our communities. We were able to recruit several of the first IMGs to go through this process."

"Most have subsequently passed their RCPSC fellowship exams in internal medicine. Although they have come as general internists, most have a specialist background from their home countries, which brings additional skills and experience to our group. They have been a pleasure to work with, from my perspective as both a colleague and Chief of Medicine."



Dr. Asha Gopinathan, an anaesthesiologist originally from India, is an integral member of the surgical team at the Welland Hospital Site of the Niagara Health System. When she arrived in Welland in 2002, she was one of the first IMGs to start with the Niagara Health System. (Niagara Health System Photo)

Two years ago Hatcher started the Canadian Association of Staff Physician Recruiters. From this perspective she has found that small communities often do not know where to begin to recruit an IMG. A common question she hears is "How do you get the IMGs in and make it work?"

Hatcher explains that it takes six months to a year to get an IMG on staff, a process that is facilitated with the ongoing support of Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care staff. Expressions of interest usually come directly to recruiters from IMGs, through the Ministry, the Professional Association

of Internes and Residents of Ontario, or networking. She encourages recruiters to wait until IMGs have been accepted into the IMG program before initiating the recruitment process with them.

Hatcher says that since the NHS began recruiting IMGs, there has been a "dramatic turnaround," particularly for anesthesia and surgery which were experiencing significant shortages back in 2001. She says there are still the usual crunch times and vacancies, but recruitment now is more planned and focused on retention. "An entirely positive experience," concludes Hatcher.

"They kind of form the backbone of our new staff and have just been phenomenal. They're people who come in and bring you all kinds of experiences."

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