

Medical-School Applications Dip for the First Time in 6 Years

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After five years of application increases, the number of students applying to the nation's medical schools slipped 3 percent this year, according to a report released on Tuesday by the Association of American Medical Colleges. The drop came at a time when medical schools were being urged to accept more students to stave off a projected shortage of physicians.

Nonetheless, the schools increased their combined enrollments by 2 percent over 2007, largely because of the addition of three new medical-school campuses, established by Mercer University, Texas A&M University, and the University of Arizona. Nationwide, first-year enrollment is now about 18,000, the highest in history.

"America's medical schools are continuing to increase their enrollment, which is absolutely critical as our population grows and ages," said Darrell G. Kirch, president and chief executive of the medical-colleges association, in a news conference on Tuesday.

The association has called on medical schools to increase enrollment by 30 percent by 2015, compared with 2002 levels, by expanding existing schools and opening new campuses. It has also been working aggressively to try to attract more members of minority groups to the profession.

A Continuing Call for Expansion

Those efforts drew mixed results this year. Applications among Latino students were up 3 percent, partly because of the opening of new campuses in regions with large Latino populations. However, the number of black and Native American applicants dropped by 4 percent and 3 percent, respectively. Women represented about 48 percent of this year's applicants, down slightly from 49 percent in 2007.

Richard A Cooper, a professor of medicine at the University of Pennsylvania and leading expert on the physician work force, said he was troubled by the application drop. Based on demographics alone, the number of applications should increase until 2010, when he predicted they would peak and start to decline. "We need to be expanding faster than we are," he said, "and the fact that applications are down is bad news. "

Dr. Kirch played down this year's drop, pointing out that it followed five years of increases.

The figures released on Tuesday were for the nation's 130 allopathic medical schools, which grant M.D. degrees. Applications were up 2.5 percent this year at the 24 osteopathic medical colleges and branch campuses, which grant D.O. degrees. The two kinds of medical schools follow similar curricula, but osteopathic schools emphasize holistic practices and often train students to manipulate muscles and joints to treat disorders and diseases.

The American Association of Colleges of Osteopathic Medicine reported that a record 11,742 people applied to its schools this year. According to the medical-colleges group, 42,231 people applied to allopathic medical schools. (There is some overlap in those numbers because some students apply to both kinds of schools.)

High-Quality Applicants

Even though those medical schools accepted more applicants from a slightly smaller pool this year, Dr. Kirch said the quality of first-year students remained high. "There are still more than two applicants for every available seat in medical school," he said. This year's applicants also had higher undergraduate grades and scores on the Medical College Admission Test, as well as more community-service and research experience, Dr. Kirch noted.

He cautioned that graduating more medical students is just part of the solution to what the association projects could be a shortage of physicians as baby boomers age. The nation also needs to pay for more residency programs, he said. Those programs, which typically last three to seven years, allow medical-school graduates to receive on-the-job training in their specialties at a hospital or clinic. The number of positions that Medicare pays for has been frozen at 1996 levels, although some hospitals and clinics have used their own or state money to expand their programs ([The Chronicle](#), October 24).

While a growing number of medical schools are opening their doors to more students, a few schools are bucking the trend. The University of Chicago's Pritzker School of Medicine plans to reduce its average class size to 88 from 112 per year by the fall of 2009.

Officials at Chicago and some other medical schools believe that the problem is not the overall supply of physicians, but how they are distributed—too few in rural and inner-city areas and not enough pursuing careers in primary care. Chicago officials cited statistics from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services predicting that the supply of physicians in the United States was expected to rise to an all-time high, from 200 doctors per 100,000 people in 1980 to 293 per 100,000 in 2010.

Smaller class sizes will allow the medical school to focus more on providing mentors to students and opportunities for hands-on learning, officials said.

"This is a way to address the maldistribution of physicians and make a clear investment in both our community and our graduates," said Holly J. Humphrey, Chicago's dean for medical education.

The medical school is located in Chicago's South Side, a chronically underserved area whose residents have higher-than-average rates of diseases like hypertension, diabetes, and asthma.

The medical school has also announced a plan intended to make it affordable for students to practice in the South Side even though medical-school graduates carry an average debt load of \$140,000. The school will offer a \$40,000 stipend, for up to four years, and will initially supplement the salaries of up to five of the approximately 100 students it graduates each year if they work in that neighborhood.

