

## Physician crunch must be addressed in US, NC

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One important goal of any health care reform must be to encourage more physicians to go into primary care, for reasons both medical and financial.

The lack of a primary care physician makes health care both less effective and more costly, less effective because health problems are not caught early and more costly because the patient winds up in an emergency room.

The nation will be short 30,000 primary-care physicians within two years, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges. Only 20 percent of the nation's physicians are in primary care, half the ideal percentage, according to Dr. Tommy Koonce, associate medical director of the UNC Family Medical Center.

In Western North Carolina, there already is a shortage of 140 primary-care providers, a category that includes nurse practitioners and physician assistants, according to Mission Health.

Why? A major reason is money. "The pay is much less. It's somewhere between one-third to half as much as the subspecialty-trained physician," said Dr. Jeffery Heck, president and CEO of Mountain Area Health Education Center.

Also, he said, primary-care physicians are the Rodney Dangerfields of medicine: They don't get no respect. "I think sometimes the environment at a big academic center, there's not as much respect for primary care, especially family medicine," Heck said.

Finally, the fee-for-service system of reimbursement encourages patient volume and thus provides incentives to refer patients to specialists, according to [kevinmd.com](http://kevinmd.com). Besides driving up costs, this increases the demand for specialists.

The primary care shortage is especially severe in rural areas. A 2010 survey by the N.C. State Education Assistance Authority, in which primary care is defined broadly to include psychiatrists and emergency medicine, shows shortages in all western counties except Mitchell, Transylvania and Jackson.

"Nationally, 20 percent of the population lives in rural areas. Nine percent of physicians live in rural areas," Heck said. "The latest survey of graduates from U.S. medical schools is only 3 percent plan to practice in a rural area."