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Wait Times in Ontario

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A survey conducted by the Canadian Skin Patient Alliance in early 2011 showed that half of Ontarians wait at least three months for a first visit with a dermatologist, and one-quarter of patients wait six months or more for an appointment.

Provincial billing data from Ontario in 2009–2010 year showed that each full-time dermatologist served 74,650 people, a figure that was in excess of the Canadian benchmark of 65,000.

The National Physician Survey in 2010 asked physicians to rate their own accessibility on behalf of patients. More than a third of dermatologists in Ontario said their accessibility was either "poor" or "fair." In contrast, 18 per cent of doctors said that access was "poor" or "fair" to all other specialists including cardiologists, neurologists, surgeons, and other specialists. 2010 National Physician Survey. The College of Family Physicians of Canada, Canadian Medical Association, the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada.

Indeed, the backlog typically means several months to see a dermatologist for general dermatological services in Ontario. The wait time is not restricted to general dermatology: wait times for specialized dermatology services such as Mohs surgery, cancer screening, phototherapy for psoriasis treatment, or an assessment for contact dermatitis, range from three to nine months because these services are mainly based at tertiary centres in the province which serve surrounding communities.

The wait times are more pronounced in remote regions of the province, which are perennially underserviced and where dermatologists are scarce in number, compared to larger centres like Toronto and Ottawa. Dermatologists based in cities like Toronto travel to spots like Sault Ste. Marie, Thunder Bay, and Timmins for outreach consultations throughout the year, but Northern Ontarians still face long waits for dermatological services.

The creation of the Northern Ontario School of Medicine (NOSM) in 2005, which serves as the faculty of medicine of Lakehead University in Thunder Bay and Laurentian University in Sudbury, may present an opportunity to alleviate the problem of too few dermatologists in Northern Ontario. NOSM will allow medical students to know the northern communities and give consideration to remaining there and setting up their practices. Ultimately, it is a lifestyle choice that will determine if they settle in underserviced regions.

Long wait times are characteristic even in smaller centres in Southern Ontario, Eastern Ontario, and Central Ontario. A young patient with acne taking Accutane® who needs to be seen by a dermatologist monthly is much more likely to be seen without a delay in Toronto than Guelph, for example.

Even in larger centres like Toronto, where there are greater concentrations of dermatologists, there are waits to see dermatologists, for many have multiple interests. They are involved in clinical trials as investigators, are teaching dermatology residents, and are active in medical associations.

In addition, dermatologists are diversifying their practices such that they are not exclusively focusing on medical dermatology. Practicing dermatologists today often offer a range of cosmetic dermatology services.

There has also been a generational shift in priorities. Young dermatologists starting their careers value a work–life balance and want to devote time to their spouses and children. The entry of one young dermatologist to a practice in Ontario may not replace the retirement of an older dermatologist who had been putting in 70 hours weekly throughout his or her career.

There is a definite challenge to reducing wait times to see dermatologists in Ontario, and the solutions will have to be multiple including funding to train more dermatologists, encouraging them to set up shop in underserviced areas through a system of incentives, and perhaps having other health professionals work alongside dermatologists more closely.