

Where is the Doctor?

As Hawaii Business Magazine says, "The doctor is not in." Call you may, call you might, but the doctor will not see you--that is, unless you can wait six months for an appointment.

There is unquestionably an extreme shortage of doctors in Hawaii, the effects of which concern every family, all our ohana, and it is alarming. Think of the difficulties involved in finding a new family doctor, or making a specialist appointment. At worst, doctors are too busy to see one; at best, one can see them in a few months - a period of time that is much too long for too many. If this constant difficulty regarding one's health is not bad enough, the deficit apparent in the statistics is undeniably sobering. A recent article in the Star Advertiser indicated that we are currently short of around 769 doctors in the islands, the highest shortage being of 381 doctors on Oahu, and the numbers are expected to increase.

Assessments done by the University of Hawaii have clearly indicated that without intervention, the rising shortage will not abate anytime soon. Kelley Withy, the Director of the AHEC at John Burns School of Medicine, corroborates this, informing that the deficit will increase significantly with the near retirement of the 600 or so senior physicians in the state. It is also evident that over time, medical students will be less and less likely to practice in Hawaii. The cost of living here, compared to the mainland, is significantly higher, making the latter infinitely more attractive, and with Medicare changes providing disadvantages for doctors, many young doctors will be further encouraged to move away in search of better prospects. As old doctors retire and medical students continue moving to practice elsewhere, the doctor numbers

will continue to decline, leaving remaining doctors overwhelmed, and families having to cope with difficult to obtain medical care.

A primary cause of this growing shortage is the exceedingly high cost of living in Hawaii. Doctors who have not already converted to electronic medical records need to pay nearly \$40,000 dollars to do it, not to mention the expense of maintaining their practices. With this huge expense comes high risk for doctors who wish to open their own private practices, and orthopedic surgeon Dr. Edward Gutteling asserts that many doctors are afraid of private practice, preferring to work in hospitals where they receive steady paychecks. Frankly, the excessive expenses are not so easily removed. There are reasons for them, and the process of lowering them is infinitely more easily said than done. Rather than tackling the issue driving doctors away, it is much easier to find a way to bring more doctors in than to prevent the ones who are leaving from going.

In New York, prospective doctors are offered scholarships that provide significant financial support, and which also come with an obligation to work in the state's health professional shortage areas (HPSA) for every year assistance is received. In terms of financial aid and grants, a program like this could significantly impact how many physicians will practice in Hawaii, given that financial matters are such a major issue. With proper funding, who would not want to live and study in Hawaii, a dream paradise? A program such as this could attract hundreds of potential doctors to the islands, bind them here for their allotted time, and maybe keep them well after that. Bringing and retaining new doctors here could quickly resolve the shortage, and make new practices available for patients to see sooner. Undoubtedly, the sooner one can be seen about their health, the less risk there will be for them.

Clarence TC Ching genuinely cared for the welfare of the citizens of Hawaii. He created low-income housing for the many who were having difficulty paying to rent or own homes, and made a noticeable impact on the community in the process. Today, his institution continues doing what he did in providing significant support for many causes, like education. His life was dedicated to helping people in Hawaii, and if he were alive today, he would understand the critical problem facing the community regarding access to doctors. Wealth and housing are important, but health is at least as important as these, if not more. Taking care of the community by resolving this problem will help many sick people and families whose health would likely worsen without prompt treatment. It would help protect and care for Hawaii's citizens, which was a goal of his life and institution.

The phrase, "there's no time like the present" has never been more pertinent than it is concerning this issue. As terrible as the problem is at the moment, it can most definitely worsen. As long as prices increase and risks surge for private practices, the problem will increase rapidly, and eventually spiral out of control. If we are going to counteract this problem, the time to do it is *now*. While the shortage is not as terrible as it could be, and while the damage is relatively minimal at present, we should already be taking measures to slow the rate of, if not turn around, the increasing loss of physicians in Hawaii. The sooner we act, the sooner we can close that gap, and the sooner we do, the safer and healthier our whole community will be.

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