

# It Takes a Village: 7 Ways Residents Can Help the Health Care Crisis on the Coast

*Submitted by the Sunshine Coast Division of Family Practice*

It's unlikely to come as a shock that the health care situation on the Sunshine Coast is challenging, largely because there are thousands of residents without a family doctor.

The current challenges aren't unique to the Coast: the shortage of physicians is a global crisis, and health care professionals are resigning in droves due to unsustainable demands.

With no end in sight to these challenges, we need to find some creative solutions. Perhaps by coming together as a community we can brainstorm ways that will help our physicians do what they're trained to do and what we need them to do: provide the best possible care for their patients.

The Division has seven suggestions for how Coasters might be able to help alleviate some of the pressure. These aren't permanent solutions but based on the current level of exhaustion and frustration felt by local physicians and residents alike, we need to start somewhere.

## 1. Recruitment

The number of people looking for a family physician is rising and there aren't enough doctors on the Coast to meet the growing demand. Why don't we just recruit more? Vancouver Coastal Health and Health Match BC, the provincial government agency that recruits doctors to BC, are doing their best but it's a global shortage and competition for qualified family physicians is high.

Currently there are over 800 vacancies for family physicians in BC. And that number is going to increase rapidly as the average age of family doctors in Canada is 49, a time when many start to plan for retirement and begin scaling back their practice.

So, what can we do?

Join us in being an active recruiter!

Know of anyone who's a medical student or doctor – perhaps your nephew, granddaughter, or second cousin twice removed in the UK? Invite them to visit you on the Coast.

If they love it here, contact the Division and we can help them learn more about their options for practicing in our little piece of paradise.

## 2. Retention

As any employer knows, it's much better to keep good employees than to find new ones.

The good news is that doctors on the Coast love living here in our small-town communities with lots of opportunities to enjoy the outdoors. But they're tired. Working throughout the pandemic, caring for an increasing and aging population, and the rising costs of running a clinic are taking a toll.

How can you help? Easy. Start with simply thanking a doc. Tell them how much you appreciate the care that they provide – write a note, say it during your appointment, tell their front-office staff. That would go a long way in boosting morale.

Communities often roll out the red carpet when they're recruiting physicians but neglect to show the same level of warmth and welcoming once the docs have made the move. Let's work to change that here on the Coast.

## 3. Donate

A real challenge on the Coast is the shortage of affordable accommodation, both rentals or homes to purchase. Contrary to what many people might think, physicians are often on limited budgets. Many carry roughly \$250,000 in student loans; the average medical student shoulders over \$120,000 in debt before they begin their residency.

We're fortunate to have the 3-bedroom Foundation House funded by donors to the Sechelt Hospital Foundation. It's a place where doctors and other healthcare professionals can stay while they're working in short-term placements on the Coast. As you can imagine, it's very busy so more accommodation is needed.

Another way that donations to the Foundation help is to purchase much needed medical equipment for our local hospital. Many family physicians on the Coast work at a clinic as well as at the hospital providing addictions/mental health, obstetrics, and emergency care. Having access to the latest equipment can help to make their job easier, increase their work satisfaction, and decrease their stress.

## 4. Advocate

As any business owner knows, overhead costs are going through the roof: technology, office supplies, staff, rent, etc. The financial stress for family doctors – who operate as a small business – is further compounded by the fact that the government does not pay them for some work that is a critical part of patient care.

One physician said he spends hours after a long workday reviewing patient test results and doing follow up – tasks for which doctors are not paid for under the current fee-for-service system in BC. And as he can't find a locum (a temporary doctor) for when he's on vacation, he has to take his laptop with him to check test results, review x-rays... all without pay.

Yet doctors in Alberta are paid for those tasks.

The fact that family doctors are overworked and underpaid also means that fewer medical students are choosing family medicine which will make the shortage even worse.

This has to stop. We all need to advocate on behalf of our physicians.

Contact the MLA for the Sunshine Coast, Nicholas Simons (Nicholas.Simons.MLA@leg.bc.ca) and let him know that BC's Ministry of Health needs to revise physician compensation so they're paid for all the patient care they provide.

And write to your local councillors and mayors to let them know that housing

– and even clinic support – is greatly needed to alleviate some of the burden for our docs.

Funding community health clinics would remove the cost of overhead as a concern for physicians. This would be a huge time saver and a major recruitment tool, giving the Coast an advantage over many other communities in BC.

## 5. Housing

Affordable accommodation is having a massive impact on the Coast for residents from all walks of life, including physicians.

If a family doctor wants to take some time off, they work hard to find a locum to provide care for their patients while they're away. It's been virtually impossible to find locums for the Sunshine Coast because the cost of a short-term rental, usually an Airbnb, can be over \$400/night. Combined with the cost for the locum's share of the clinic's overhead, it's often not financially worthwhile for a locum to work here.

Some doctors have accommodated locums in their homes while they're away, but as we can all imagine, prepping your home for a stranger to stay in is another layer of work and stress for physicians and their families.

### How can the community help?

If you have an Airbnb or guest suite and are able to rent it for below-market rates to locums, let us know.

Earlier this month, the Division put out an appeal on Facebook for long-term accommodation for a new physician. Many thanks to everyone who shared the post and responded.

Housing is critical. One physician signed up to move to the Coast but couldn't find a suitable place to rent. Out of desperation, he bluntly told the prospective landlord: "if you don't rent this to me, I'm done looking; I won't be moving to the Coast." Thank you to the homeowner who signed a lease with him!

But we need to do more. Contact your local councillors and ask them about community subsidized long-term housing for healthcare professionals. That will help to recruit and retain doctors, nurses, care aides, etc. all who play a critical role in providing our community with the best patient care.

Doctors have all the options in the world – they can choose to work in equally beautiful places where the cost of housing is considerably less.

Let's do what we can to bring them - and keep them - here.

## 6. Support

Not so long ago, being a family doctor in a rural community meant being an integral part of the local fabric. Often, they were able to provide extensive health care because the entire community would pitch in to assist them, personally and professionally.

Today, doctors have more privacy, which is valued, but then they must take care of everything on their own. For example, one physician felt terrible having to take a full day away from the clinic just to get his car serviced in the city.

The assumption that their spouse could take care of things like that is an outdated one: often a physician's partner works in equally demanding roles. This is a time when we need to come together to think outside of the box for possible solutions.

Anything that could help physicians spend time on the things that mean the most to them - their practice, their families and friends, their hobbies – and less on the things that could easily be done by others, the better.

## 7. Be Kind

Many doctors on the Coast are reporting a dramatic increase in angry patients venting to them and their staff about the wait lists and lack of appointments.

Physicians understand that Covid has been rough for everyone but ask that people remember that health care professionals – and their families – have been in the thick of it. One physician said how he thought that he and his wife would have to live in separate parts of their house, to not have any physical contact during the pandemic, to protect her.

The solution for this challenge is easy.

### Be kind.

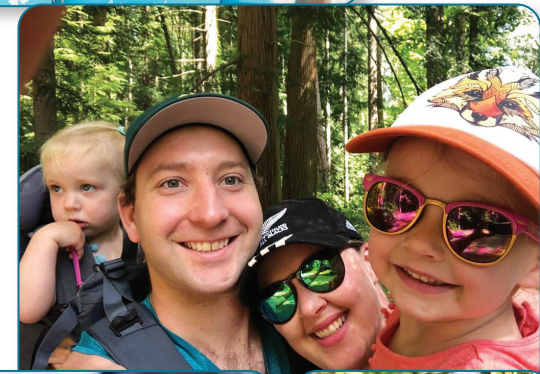
It's not your doctor's fault that your hip surgery is a year away. That the wait list for psychiatric care is two years. They can't help that there is a physician shortage so your appointment is weeks away. They're sorry that they can't provide care for thousands of unattached patients but they're already struggling to meet the demands of the more than 1,200 patients on their roster.

Rest assured, doctors on the Coast are dedicated to doing everything they can to provide you with the best possible care. All the clinics and doctors support each other to try and provide care for patients without a family physician. They ask for your patience and gently remind everyone that the ER is to be used only for emergencies. Some clinics offer same day appointments as it's been proven to provide the best urgent care coverage. Contact your MLA as he has a better chance of making a difference than your GP.

In the meantime, please be polite and understanding to medical office staff, to everyone at the clinic, fellow patients included. Help out your neighbour who is waiting for surgery. Check in on the frail senior who lives next door.

### Be kind. Be calm. And be safe.

The Sunshine Coast Division of Family Practice supports family physicians on the Coast in providing and improving local health services.



**Sunshine Coast**  
**Division of Family Practice**  
A GPSC initiative

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Photo: Family physicians on the Sunshine Coast love living here in our small-town communities with lots of opportunities to enjoy the outdoors.