

## **Update on Ontario's Family Doctor Shortage**

### **October 7, 2022**

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One month ago, I published an article on staff shortages of healthcare workers, specifically, nurses and family doctors.

After that article was released, the Ontario College of Family Physicians released a statement that “1-in-5 people in Ontario could be without a family doctor in the next three years” ([source](#)). This would be 3 million people.

“The family doctor shortage will be felt by all, regardless of where we live in Ontario. In some cases, entire families could be without one,” said OCFP President-Elect Dr. Mekalai Kumanan ([source](#)).

Out of 15 million people in Ontario, 1.8 million don't have a family doctor or are only loosely attached to one ([source](#)). The data show that people are more likely to be unattached to a family doctor if they live in a low-income neighbourhood, if they live in poverty, and/or if they are new to the country ([source](#)).

In addition, another 1.7 million have a family doctor who is 65 years old or older ([source](#)). About double the number of family doctors retired during the pandemic compared to previous years, so it's likely that many of these 1.7 million people will soon be without a family doctor ([source](#)).

### **Why is this happening?**

There is a detailed explanation in the article that I mentioned above (click [here](#) to read it)!

Another reason, which isn't included in that article, is that Ontario has an ageing population.

Not only is the family physician workforce ageing (and retiring), but the patient population is also ageing. As we age, we are more likely to have many more chronic diseases ([source](#)).

It's more and more common that patients are going to see their family doctor for five concerns instead of just one concern ([source](#)). The fact that many people did not see their family doctor during the pandemic also contributes to this problem ([source](#)). This means that they need to spend longer periods of time with their family doctor. Although everyone deserves as much time as they need with their family doctor, during this shortage, longer visits make it more difficult for that family doctor's other patients' to access them.

## **Do I really need a family doctor?**

Yes, everyone in Ontario needs a family doctor ([source](#)).

One of Ontario's best known family doctors, Dr. Danielle Martin, Chair of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Toronto, shares why.

Family doctors have an important role in catching illnesses before their symptoms become severe, keeping chronic disease under control, and preventing illnesses that often make people need to go to the hospital ([source](#)).

Dr. Martin gives the example of a family doctor managing a person's diabetes, high blood pressure, and cholesterol to prevent them from having a stroke or heart attack ([source](#)). Conversations about the importance of taking supplements and increasing physical activity can prevent them from going to the hospital, which has the additional benefit of saving taxpayer's money ([source](#)).

Dr. Martin explained: "There is no number of hospital beds that we can build and no number of emergency departments that we can open that will allow our health system to function in a normal way unless everybody has easy access to family medicine" ([source](#)).

## **What is being done about this issue? Is there anything I can do?**

The Ontario College of Family Physicians (OCFP) created a campaign called Life Without a Doctor. The OCFP is the provincial chapter of the College of Family Physicians of Canada, and it is made up of 15,000 family doctors across Ontario ([source](#)).

The OCFP used their collective knowledge to write a policy proposal with 3 steps for the government to ensure that everyone in Ontario has access to a family doctor ([source](#)).

You can help spread the word by writing to your Member of Provincial Parliament (MPP). To find your MPP, go to <https://www.ola.org/en/members> and click "See Current MPPs" to get a list ([source](#)). You can sort this list by name or by riding ([source](#)). If you don't know your electoral district, click [here](#) to do a Postal Code search, or call 1-800-677-8683, TTY: 1-888-292-2312 ([source](#)).

You can also spread awareness of this issue by posting this campaign on your social media accounts. You can use the hashtag #LifeWithoutADoctor, share images with facts about the family doctor shortage, and share videos of people telling stories of how they were impacted by not having a family doctor ([source](#)). Click [here](#) for OCFP resources that you can share.

## **How do I find a family doctor?**

There is a service called Health Care Connect that refers Ontarians who don't have a physician to a family healthcare provider who may be accepting new patients ([source](#)).

Patients with no family doctor can call or go online to [www.ontario.ca/healthcareconnect](http://www.ontario.ca/healthcareconnect) to register with the program ([source](#)). To successfully register, unattached patients must have a valid OHIP card and complete a health questionnaire to determine their need for family health care services ([source](#)). Priority is given to individuals who have greater health needs ([source](#)).

Once registered, program participants are assigned to a Care Connector ([source](#)). These are nurses employed by Home and Community Care Support Services Organizations, who will work with family physicians and nurse practitioners that are accepting new patients ([source](#)).

Once an available doctor or nurse is found, Health Care Connect will give the patient the provider's practice information to schedule their first appointment ([source](#)).

For more information on how to apply, please visit [www.ontario.ca/healthcareconnect](http://www.ontario.ca/healthcareconnect).

## Final Thoughts

To sum up, being connected with a family doctor can not only prevent you from needing to go to the hospital for a preventable illness, but it can also free up space for others.

Research shows that when Ontarians have equitable access to comprehensive team based primary care, led by a family doctor, they are healthier, have fewer visits to the hospital/emergency department/specialty care, and are overall more satisfied with their care ([source](#)). Also, it reduces strain on the healthcare system and emergency departments ([source](#)).

If you have a family doctor, but you're concerned about being able to access them, you can also use telemedicine services. Click [here](#) to read another one of our articles that outlines all of your telemedicine options.

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If you think you may be experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, take the self-assessment at [www.ontario.ca/coronavirus](http://www.ontario.ca/coronavirus). Follow all directions from your medical provider or your local health unit at the following phone numbers:

Telehealth Ontario: 1-866-797-0000

Toronto Public Health: 416-338-7600

Peel Public Health: 905-799-7700

Durham Region Health Department: 905-668-7711

York Region Public Health: 1-877-464-9675