

Doctors appeal for help to avert physician crisis on Salt Spring

By [Elizabeth Nolan - Gulf Islands Driftwood](#) Published: **November 09, 2011 10:00 AM**

Salt Spring doctors are asking the community for help in recruiting new physicians to the island to avoid a potentially disastrous work overload.

Family practitioners recently held an emergency meeting to discuss the continuing loss of their members, with one doctor confirmed to be leaving practice within the next nine months and two more potentially to follow.

“We found out that whilst most of us love Salt Spring and the community and are deeply committed to our patients, many of us are feeling overwhelmed by the workload,” Dr. David Beaver said on behalf of the group.

“The thought of one or more GPs leaving and the rest trying to cover the increased workload may lead to a crisis in the provision of general practice services on this island.”

Like many rural districts across Canada, Salt Spring has a difficult time recruiting new doctors and a faces a high turn-over once they're here. According to Beaver, there are several reasons for that, including the the extra amount of work that comes with serving in the emergency room and caring for hospital patients on top of seeing regular patients during office hours. The inability to take time off only adds to the stress.

“If nothing changes we would be put under extreme pressure to look after the 3,000 orphan patients that have lost their GP,” he said.

“Basically we'd be burning the candle at both ends, which would make it very difficult to provide good care.”

Beaver is himself intending to leave his practice and is currently advertising for someone to take his place, but observed that when Dr. Jan Malherbe left a few years ago, he was unable to find a replacement despite diligent efforts to do so. The island's remaining GPs chipped in by dividing up his patient list.

Beaver said in addition to his own replacement, the island could ideally use at least two more GPs to cover the load. Having access to adequate office space would definitely be a help, and local doctors are currently considering a way to work together in shared practice. But to attract new doctors to the island in the first place, Beaver feels a community recruitment committee that is independent from the hospital board or the Vancouver Island Health Authority is necessary.

“In other places, the community has become involved in recruiting new doctors. The more active communities have been very successful in finding new people,” he said, adding Salt Spring should carefully study the successful efforts.

BC Health Recruiter News, the newsletter published by Health Match BC, reported last spring the communities of Chase and Port Alberni have both had successful recruiting campaigns in recent years, despite their isolated settings.

Some of the suggestions the Recruiter News lists for communities to consider are as simple as sending an annual thank you letter to all physicians. New doctors can be welcomed with items donated by the community, such as golf passes, gym passes, movie and concert tickets and restaurant gift certificates. Beaver agreed these sorts of gestures would be worthwhile, and if a committee is convened it can look at how to possibly fund them.

Beaver said the ideal committee would have around five to six members who are adept at management, marketing and personnel skills. They would look into specialized marketing and would attend career fairs and doctor fairs. If enough people are interested, he hopes the group could be up and running before Christmas.

Beaver will act as a liaison until a chairperson for the hoped-for committee can be found. Anyone who would like to participate should email him at practiceonsaltspring@hotmail.com.

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