

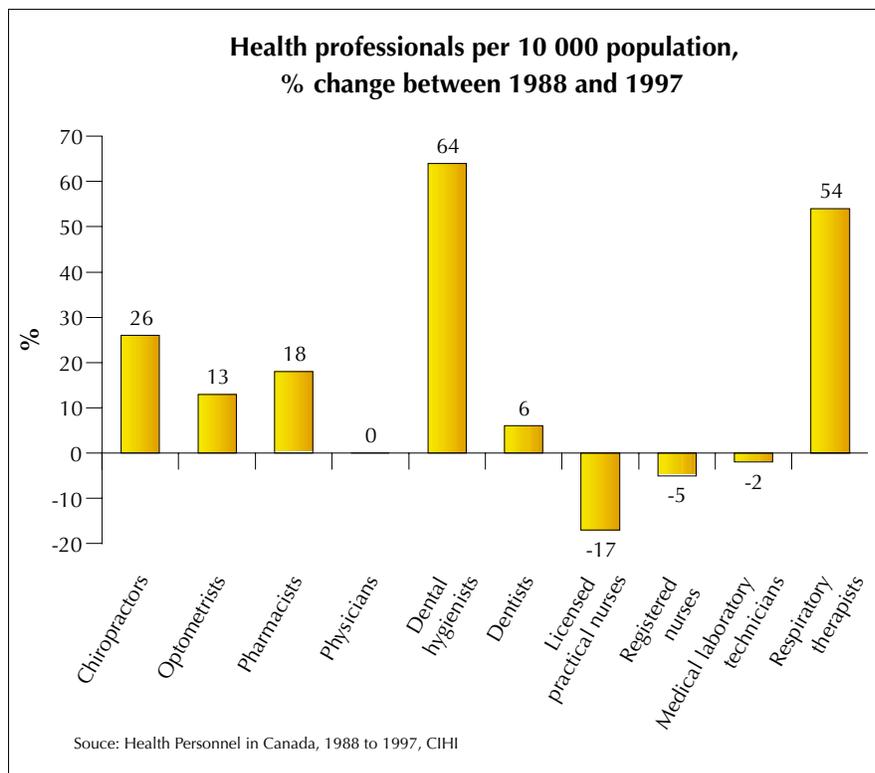
Pulse

Number of health care workers lags behind population growth

A Canadian Institute for Health Information report released in June paints a widely varying picture of trends concerning the number of health care workers in different provinces. While provinces such as Newfoundland and New Brunswick saw gains in the number of health workers per capita between 1988 and 1997 (increases of 22% and 15%, respectively), Ontario, Alberta and British Columbia experienced losses of 8%, 11% and 7%, respectively. Overall, the number of health professionals per 10 000 Canadians fell by 1.7% over the period, from 185 to 182.

Of the 17 occupational groups included in the report, nursing personnel (licensed practical nurses and registered nurses) accounted for 62% of the total. The second largest group was physicians, who accounted for just over 10% of all health personnel in 1997.

The percentage change in the number of health professionals between 1988 and 1997 varied greatly among occupational groups. While the per capita rate for both nurses and physicians decreased during this period, by -8.2% and -0.3% respectively, the



number of chiropractors and dental hygienists per 10 000 people increased by 26% and 64% respectively, and the

number of occupational therapists more than doubled. — *Lynda Buske*, buskel@cma.ca

South Africa can be likened to “a patient in the emergency ward who is dying.” He called on government and the pharmaceutical industry, which he said have been engaged in a form of “collusive paralysis,” to provide anti-retroviral drugs to those who need them most. The announcement that Boehringer Ingelheim will give free nevirapine to African women to prevent the spread of HIV from mother to child was greeted with the usual cynicism, as other drug companies have made similar promises and failed to follow through. However, given that a recent study revealed that a single dose of nevirapine given to a mother in labour and to the child at

birth was as efficacious as the more expensive regimen involving zidovudine, delivery on this promise could prevent many infections.

The AIDS deniers were not taken seriously by many people at the conference, although some here still believed that HIV is not the cause of AIDS. However, most African health care workers have clearly accepted the science that unequivocally links HIV with AIDS, and they have been some of the most vocal critics of government inaction.

There has been an interesting shift in the sense of urgency at this meeting. A few of the old ACT-UP types were here, but they were clearly over-

shadowed by the enormity of the disaster that is unfolding in sub-Saharan Africa, and there have been few of the protests that captured attention at earlier conferences.

Professor Roy Anderson, an epidemiologist from Oxford University, spelled out just how bad things are here. “We’re not yet half-way through the epidemic,” he said.

At this point there are about 24 million HIV-infected people in sub-Saharan Africa, and there are about 4 million new infections every year. Anderson also warned that new epidemics are already starting in India and China, and those countries must take action now. — *Anthony Jeffery*, Durban