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Doctor shortage ails New Orleans

By Scott Sternberg, Contributing writer

Dr. Robert Travis Kenny is looking for a good family care physician to share his Canal Street practice. He says he could actually handle another two doctors -- he's got the offices, the examining rooms and most importantly, the business.

Unfortunately, people don't want to join his crusade to keep the city in a healthful state, he said, even though his business is up 50 percent from pre-Katrina levels.

Kenny's problem is illustrative of the shortage of health care workers in the metro area post-Katrina. Statistics released in the spring showed the area had lost 77 percent of its primary-care doctors, 70 percent of its dentists and 89 percent of its psychiatrists. The local market was declared a "health professional shortage area" in April.

Recent statistics provided by the Department of Health and Hospitals show that the number of doctors registered with Blue Cross/Blue Shield -- which normally has contracts with close to 95 percent of doctors in the area -- is down 51.4 percent from pre-Katrina levels.

Those numbers could rise as doctors rebuild their offices and return. Most of the physicians registered in the New Orleans area have stayed registered with the state health department, officials said.

Jeanne Haupt of the Department of Health and Hospitals said that now that the area has been declared a federally underserved area, there are several federal programs that doctors, particularly new doctors, can take advantage of, such as loan repayment programs and a 10 percent bonus on Medicare claims.

But that might not be enough to fill the age gap, said local internist Brobson Lutz, spokesman for the Orleans Parish Medical Society.

"Really the ones that we're losing are the ones in their 30s and 40s," Lutz said. "Us old-timers are staying -- there's almost like there was a world war and it's the old-timers left to man the home front."

It's not all old-timers, though: 253 medical school graduates started residencies around the city this summer, bringing some hope despite a shrinking number of spots after hospital closures and a faculty exodus.

Tulane School of Medicine Dean Paul Whelton said he was encouraged by the number of applicants to this year's program, which was on par with other years.

Tulane is down 60 residents this year, but Whelton said applications are encouraging and he thinks after the area gets "another year behind us, " things will improve.

It's a general understanding that most residents set up practice around where they completed their residencies, adding to the number of primary-care physicians for the city. Whelton also said faculty recruitment has not been a problem.

"We're just in that phase in the last couple of weeks now where really outstanding individuals from outside the area are looking very seriously at a move to Tulane, " Whelton said. "I'd say our faculty is optimistic and spirits are very high."

Around the city, Ochsner is hosting three more residents than last year, while LSU is holding steady on its numbers, down only 15 residents from last year's entering class.

New residents aside, Lutz said if he were a new doctor preparing to open a private practice, there's no way he'd come to this area -- especially if he were a specialist such as a cardiologist or surgeon, which depend on a capable hospital system to foster business.

"The highly specialized physicians were greatly dependent on having a hospital base population needing their services. That's gone. When there were 1, 500 hospital beds here, they were busy bees, " Lutz said. "In general, the closer someone is to primary health care, the easier it is for doctors to make a living."

Ochsner is operating with 450 beds, the same number it had pre-Katrina. Shortages in registered nurses and pharmacy workers that were present before the storm persist.

Joan Mollohan, vice president of human resources at Ochsner, said the hospital network lost about 110 doctors out of 670 after the storm, and has since hired another 150. The dynamics have changed though, she said.

The 150 newly hired do not necessary replace the specialties of the 110 lost, Mollohan said.

"As you can imagine, there are a lot of physicians that practiced at Memorial Hospital, " Mollohan said. "We've hired physicians that didn't have a place to practice because their office was gone or they didn't have a hospital to admit to."

Back on Canal Street, Kenny was seeing more than 25 patients a day in August, which he considered a slow month. But that should skyrocket to 40 or 50 patients a day in October, he said.

That's almost too much business, he said.

"I just keep asking people, is there someone from New Orleans east or someone from Chalmette that needs an office?" Kenny said. "I've got the space and I certainly have the business."

