



L-R: Ashley Miller, Harbir S. Gill, and Ijab Khanafer, organizers of the Canadian Federation of Medical Students' Federal Lobby Day on Parliament Hill on March 29. IJAB KHANAFAER

More diversity needed in medical schools, say med students

A broader range of students from low-income and rural backgrounds would help address Canada's doctor shortage

By JOAN DELANEY
Epoch Times Staff

To alleviate the doctor shortage in underserved areas, the country's future doctors are calling on Ottawa to increase the diversity in medical schools by attracting more rural students.

The Canadian Federation of Medical Students (CFMS) believes the inadequate admission of low-income and rural students to medical schools will result in a failure to meet the health needs of all Canadians.

During the organization's Federal Lobby Day on March 29, medical students from across the country met with more than 100 MPs and senators to discuss the under-representation of rural and low socioeconomic groups in Canada's medical schools.

"We wanted to inform them that we felt the medical students'

population was inadequately representing the Canadian population, because there's significant under-representation of students from low-income backgrounds as well as students from rural backgrounds," says CFMS vice president of communications Ijab Khanafer.

Khanafer cites a CFMS survey which found that just 10.8 percent of medical students are of rural origin—despite the fact that 22.4 percent of Canadians live in rural areas.

Students with rural backgrounds are 2.5 times more likely to practice in a rural community, the survey showed, and students with low-income backgrounds are more likely to serve low-income patients. They are also more likely to be family doctors, which would help reduce the shortage.

"Rural or low-income, they're both more likely to practice as

family physicians—and it's a discipline in which Canada is experiencing significant shortages," says Khanafer.

The CFMS want a task force set up—such as those initiated in Australia and the United States—to investigate ways to increase diversity in medical schools. Medical schools in Australia introduced incentives to increase enrolment of rural students, while in the U.S., grant programs were created to assist low-income medical students in financial need.

Khanafer says these are fairly simple solutions that have a proven track record. "In the short-term this could have costs associated, but in the long-term this would definitely be a worthwhile investment."

A 2006 study by the Canadian Institute for Health Information found that in 2004, just 9 percent of Canadian doctors worked in rural areas, servicing 21 per cent of the country's population.

The under-representation of medical specialists such as paediatricians and gynaecologists was even more pronounced, with a mere 2 percent working in rural and small-town Canada.

However, the study found that rural family doctors work differently to their urban counterparts in that they offer a broader range of clinical procedures.

A report by the Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada has recommended that all Canadian medical schools enhance the admission process to foster increased diversity and create a more representative physician workforce.

"Some work is going to be done at the medical school level, and of course we would hope that some will be done at the provincial level. But we also believe that there's work to be done on the federal level," says Khanafer.

The med students who met with MPs and senators received "a lot of positive feedback," she adds, including the possibility of using some of the committees that are already established on Parliament Hill instead of setting up a task force.

"The senators and MPs also gave us suggestions as to what we should do next and how to best address the issue, and so we'll be following up on those suggestions and hopefully see some results from that."

The CFMS is a student-led national organization that represents

Underwater robot to stake Canada's Arctic claim

ROBOT CONTINUED FROM P1

"At some point, there will be another line on the map of Canada showing the outer limits of the extended continental shelf. The staff of the Borden

Island camp are among those who will have helped to put that new line on the map," Mr. Cannon said in a statement.

His arrival on Monday also marked the first dive in the Arctic of the Explorer, a Canadian-made autonomous underwater vehicle (AUV) equipped with state-of-the-art sonar technology for Arctic research and mapping.

Canada is the first country to use this type of mini robotic submarine to operate under ice in Arctic waters. The federal government acquired two Explorers last year specifically to support the northern mapping effort.

The dive from the Borden Island camp took about two hours, three or four kilometres out and then back, which is a standard first deployment when a new mission begins, said James Ferguson, vice president of Port Coquitlam, B.C.-based International Submarine Engineering Ltd. (ISE) that built the AUVs.

"Over the next few days we'll be working to understand the environment that the vehicles are operating in over longer distances," said Mr. Ferguson, noting that six or seven ISE engineers are in the Arctic helping Natural Resources Canada (NRCan) staff operate the AUVs.

ISE has been building AUVs since the mid-1980s. Mr. Ferguson said a typical mission will see an AUV programmed to travel 175 to 200 kilometres to reach the survey location. It may then do a 50-kilometre survey before returning to the starting point.

"As it approaches the end of a mission, we use a noise-source acoustic beacon that it homes in on so that we get it back to the point of recovery."

The bright yellow torpedo-shaped Explorer is 7.4 metres long and weighs 2,200 kilograms. Powered by rechargeable lithium-ion batteries like the kind used in laptops, cell phones, and other portable electronics, the AUV has a range of some 450 kilometres and can travel to a depth of 5,000 metres, or 17,000 feet, Mr. Ferguson said.

The Borden Island mission is to support Canada's land claim under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The law outlines the range of sovereign rights that a country has in its internal waters and in various maritime zones depending on the distance from shore, such as rights over research, protection, exploration, and fisheries and other resources.

The UNCLOS recognizes a country's sovereignty up to 200 nautical miles (370 kilometres) from its coastline. However, a country can claim sovereignty beyond this limit, up to 350 nautical miles (648 kilometres) from shore, if it can prove that its continental shelf extends that far as a natural extension of its land territory.

Canada ratified the UNCLOS treaty in 2003 and has until 2013 to prepare evidence and submit a claim to the U.N. Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf.



AUTONOMOUS SUBMARINE: A photo of an Explorer-class autonomous underwater vehicle (AUV) operating underwater. INTERNATIONAL SUBMARINE ENGINEERING LTD.

"The AUV has now completed three test surveys around the ice camp and has performed perfectly," said Dr. Jacob Verhoef, director of NRCan's UNCLOS Program, by email from the High Arctic on Wednesday. "We are planning one more test survey and then will send the AUV to the offshore camp, which is about 300 kilometres from the main camp."

To launch the AUV into the water requires cutting a hole through the ice and removing 30 tonnes of ice. It was not difficult to find a suitable location to cut the hole at the main camp, about 5 kilometres south of Borden Island, Dr. Verhoef said. However, he noted that it was much harder to find a location for the offshore camp. Researchers started monitoring ice floes in early January to find a suitable location.

"One of the challenges unique in the Arctic is that in many of the places we need to survey, the ice is moving," said Mr. Ferguson. After an AUV is

deployed from a location on an ice floe, it may take three or four days to complete the survey. Meanwhile, the floating piece of ice may have moved as much as 40 kilometres.

"That presents somewhat of a risk in recovery. That means we have to have a much more powerful beacon for the vehicle to home in on," he said.

"Presently the drifts are small, three to five kilometres per day. However, this could change with significant wind events," said Dr. Verhoef, noting that currently the weather conditions are good at the main camp, with clear skies, light wind, and a temperature of -25 degrees centigrade.

"However, this can change quickly and we cannot say how many weather delays we will have."

Dr. Verhoef's team is collecting and analyzing data along the entire Canadian Archipelago, about 1,200 kilometres east to west. After several years focused on the eastern Arctic, it is now looking west, starting with the Borden Island mission which is expected to continue through the spring of 2010. The island mostly belongs to the Northwest Territories but its easternmost section belongs to Nunavut.

"Our data is widely spaced, along profiles several tens of kilometres apart. We have now completed over 70 percent of the [total] data collection and hope to add more to it during this survey and the next survey in the fall of 2010, jointly with the U.S., which will collect more data in the western Arctic," said Dr. Verhoef.

In addition to drifting ice, "another risk is that the bottom we're surveying is unknown," Mr. Ferguson said. "The vehicle may encounter obstacles which it can't possibly avoid in time," such as an underwater cliff.

But "there's an advantage [in the Arctic] because there's not a lot of sea life living under ice, and no shipping, so it's acoustically very quiet. The acoustic sensors and communication systems we use work over a much longer range underneath the ice than they do over an open ocean."

The acoustic sensors used to collect the survey data is manufactured by Perth, Ontario-based Knudsen Engineering Limited near Ottawa, which has produced sonar systems for Arctic survey mapping since the 1980s.

NRCan, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Defence Research and Development Canada, and Environment Canada are collaborating to prepare Canada's submission to the U.N. commission in December 2013.

"We are on track for a strong submission by our deadline in 2013," Dr. Verhoef said.

Kenney's refugee overhaul gets good reviews

REFUGEE CONTINUED FROM P1

Kenney also touted the support the plan has received from Peter Showler, director of the Refugee Forum at the University of Ottawa and former chair of the Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada.

Showler wrote an op-ed supportive of the changes but raised concerns that the rapidness of the initial IRB interview could make effective legal representation difficult. He also said serious problems could arise from Kenney's most contentious proposal: the safe country list.

The safe country list is Kenney's response, copied from the United Kingdom, Australia, and United States, to flash floods of fake refugees that overwhelm the system. The influx causes massive delays for genuine refugees and costs Canadian taxpayers a fortune for years of social services and appeals as the refugee system tries to eject them from the country.

But the safe country list isn't like Santa Claus's nice list—it will only ever include the handful of democratic countries with solid human rights records that have become the source of a sudden surge of refugee claimants.

In cases like this, such a country could be deemed "safe" and claimants from there would be forced to fight their deportation at a federal court rather than the regular appeal process—a system that will also be dramatically simplified under the reforms. Kenny pointed to Hungary as a country that would make the list if it were in place now. A member of Nato and the European Union, last year Hungary became a top source of refugees to Canada.

Kenney said that of the 2,500 Hungarians that applied for asylum, 97 percent withdrew or abandoned their claims.

"They didn't actually need protection in Canada. Many of them actually went back to Hungary and of all the claims filed, only three were given protection by the IRB. That means that there was an acceptance rate of close to zero percent."

Kenney said in some cases criminal networks or unscrupulous businesses are sending people to Canada through the refugee system. In other interviews, he has said they come to cash in on generous social programs.

"We need an additional tool to accelerate the process in order to send a message to the commercial and sometimes criminal networks that organize those spikes in unfounded asylum claims that people people won't be able to stay in Canada forever or for several years—that they will be removed after a fair hearing and an appeal within a few months."

Kenney's new system would send claimants from safe countries leaving Canada within a year and will provide additional resources for the Canadian Border Services Agency that will be used exclusively to round up rejected asylum applicants and get them out of the country. Some 38,000 have already disappeared.

NDP immigration critic Olivia

Chow has decried the safe list as creating a two-tier refugee system, while Kenney has said fake refugees turn Canada's whole immigration program into a two-tier system where honest immigrants wait in line while cheaters jump the queue through the refugee system.

But Showler also raised concerns about the safe list, saying there is serious risk if an unsafe country gets deemed safe and Canada sends genuine refugees back without giving them a full appeal.

Kenney said the safe list would only include six countries if it were in place

'The current system is broken, it needs to be repaired.'

— Immigration Minister Jason Kenney

now. Without it, he explained, the only way to deal with this kind of problem is to impose a visa on the source country like he did with Mexico and the Czech Republic this year—a blow to Canada's diplomatic and commercial interests with those countries.

There has been some concern that having a safe list could open the refugee system to diplomatic pressure but Kenney said that is not going to happen.

"There is not going to be a safe list where China say is lobbying to be on the safe list. There will only be a list of a handful of countries that are democratic, respect human rights, offer protection to people who need it and are the principal source of unfounded claims," he said.

"There is a fairly high percentage of asylum claims from China that are accepted, so that fact alone would mean that China would not qualify for the safe country of origin designation, based on the criteria that I have outlined. Secondly, consideration of safe country designation would look at a country's human rights record, and we are talking about democracies with a very strong human rights record, and I will leave it to you to interpret whether or not it appears China would qualify."

The Liberals look to be on board with the changes. Maurizio Bevilacqua, the official opposition's immigration critic, has raised some concerns about there being enough cash to fuel the plan, but seems likely to support the bill that will make the changes.

The NDP and Bloc Quebecois raised concerns about the overhaul for a couple days during question period, but seem to have dropped the issue, indicating acceptance if not approval.

Kenney said the only organizations to criticize the package are a couple on the "fringe left" and their disapproval was a given.

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