

New B.C. medical school pondered; Facility, which could be located at SFU or on UBC satellite campus, seen as part of solution to doctor shortage

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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UBC medical school dean Gavin Stuart, who has been part of the discussions, said, "Should there be another medical school in B.C.? I think it's a good discussion to have."

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"There's some urgency to health workplace planning because there is a real shortage of doctors and a medical school in this jurisdiction would be very complementary to that objective," Murray said in an interview. SFU has a faculty of health sciences with programs in molecular biology and biochemistry, gerontology, kinesiology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, statistics and actuarial science.

FULL TEXT

Preliminary discussions have started about a second B.C. medical school to be located either at Simon Fraser University or a new satellite campus of the University of B.C.

"I need to move forward with plans to secure health professionals for this region," said Fraser Health Authority chief executive Dr. Nigel Murray, who was hired a year ago to lead the sprawling health region.

"There's some urgency to health workplace planning because there is a real shortage of doctors and a medical school in this jurisdiction would be very complementary to that objective," Murray said in an interview.

"The troubling statistics are that Surrey has 56 family doctors per 100,000 population, and a place like downtown Vancouver has 140 per 100,000. The evidence is that doctors tend to settle and practise in the communities where they are trained, so we need to put some plans in place."

Murray said although he has been talking to top officials at both SFU and UBC, it is too early to say whether that will lead to a new medical school or where it would be located.

"Both universities are fundamental to our future," he said. "We need to improve our teaching, training and research capabilities in this region. It's one of the largest and the fastest-growing in Canada."

Although UBC has doubled its medical school enrolment in recent years, the province still has one of the lowest ratios of medical students to population. Ontario has six medical schools and Quebec has four. Even Alberta, with a smaller population than B.C., has two medical schools.

SFU has a faculty of health sciences with programs in molecular biology and biochemistry, gerontology, kinesiology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, statistics and actuarial science. Each year, several pre-med students from SFU get accepted into the UBC medical school program.

John O'Neil, dean of health sciences at SFU, acknowledged Fraser Health officials are anxious to increase physician supply.

"It is difficult recruiting and retaining doctors when there is no academic (medical school) campus," O'Neil said. "So the informal conversations are about whether B.C. needs another medical school and if so, would SFU be interested in that?"

"Are we? Of course it would be interesting to us, but I don't know if it's at the point where we're talking about a medical school at this point. No one has reached clear thinking on that," he said.

He added that SFU "doesn't have the infrastructure right now for a medical school."

"We would definitely need more resources and more infrastructure and training if we were to establish a medical school," he said.

There is no shortage of potential students. UBC had more than 1,800 applications for its medical school this year, accepting 256.

UBC medical school dean Gavin Stuart, who has been part of the discussions, said, "Should there be another medical school in B.C.? I think it's a good discussion to have."

Stuart said UBC medical school graduates and undergraduates already train at hospitals in the Fraser region.

By the time the Okanagan satellite of the UBC medical school is ready to open in 2011, UBC will be admitting 288 medical students a year. The needs about 400 more doctors each year to replace those who leave or retire.

Doctors from other provinces and countries help fill the gap, but an estimated 150,000 residents don't have a family doctor and long waits to see specialists are notorious.

This past spring, UBC graduated the first class of medical students from its expanded program. According to the current issue of the B.C. Medical Journal, the impetus for the expanded school came eight years ago when 7,000 Prince George residents protested the shortage of doctors and poor access to health care in the northern region. Premier Gordon Campbell and health minister George Abbott could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

Sun Health Issues Reporter

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Credit: Pamela Fayerman; Vancouver Sun

Illustration

Map: StatsCan ; Vancouver Sun / Enrolment in Canadian Medical Schools (Per 100,000 Population by Province) ;;
Caption:

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