



COMMENTARY ON THE NUMBER OF PALLIATIVE PHYSICIANS IN CANADA February 2015

Currently there is no reliable data on the number of palliative care physicians in Canada. Attempts to count the number of physicians are difficult because palliative care has not historically existed as a specialty. Physicians practising palliative care have a wide variety of backgrounds and training, and many provide palliative care part time. The Canadian Society of Palliative Care Physicians (CSPCP) is currently working with partner organizations including the CMA, Royal College, and CFPC to better define the different types of palliative care physicians in order to conduct a meaningful count.

The challenge of counting physicians care physicians is well recognized. We are often asked "how many members does the Canadian Society of Palliative Physicians have?" We can easily answer that question - just over 350 members as of Dec 31, 2014 - **but this does not in any way represent the number of palliative care physicians who currently practice in Canada.** The reasons for this are twofold. First, physicians can practice palliative care without being a member of the CSPCP. And second, CSPCP members come from a broad spectrum of backgrounds and the amount of clinical time these individuals work providing palliative care is highly variable.

The majority of CSPCP members are family physicians who provide palliative care to varying degrees, either solely to their own patients or within their community. Others have years of extra training and provide specialized palliative care services in hospitals and communities. Others are clinical instructors, researchers, or physician administrators -- and others do various combinations of all of these. The number of hours per week providing palliative medicine services can be as little as 1-2; ranging as high as 60 hours per week. This makes it very difficult to estimate capacity in the health care system to provide specialized and semi-specialized palliative medicine services.

It should also be noted that many GPs, family physicians, and non-palliative-care specialists are learning the importance of an integrated palliative approach to care. We have no way to measure how many physicians have basic skills in palliative care -- though we strongly endorse equipping all Canadian physicians with these skills. It is equally important to note that palliative physicians do not work alone. Palliative care is best provided by an interprofessional team and supported by trained volunteers.

In the future it will be easier to count the number of specialized and semi-specialized palliative care physicians in Canada, due to the planned introduction of two new credentials. The Royal College is developing Palliative Medicine as a subspecialty, and the College of Family Physicians of Canada is developing a Certificate of Added Competence in Palliative Care. In the interim, the CSPCP and its partner organizations will work with its partner organizations to assess current capacity in the system to provide specialized and semi-specialized palliative medicine services. Results are likely to be available in late 2015.