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Half of BC's rheumatologists set to retire within ten years triggering concern for the future

Vancouver, BC – Data from the first-ever survey of British Columbia's rheumatology physician population provides warnings in each area of the province about coming trends concerning the supply of rheumatologists. The online survey conducted in May 2010 showed that a tight rheumatologist supply is on track to become even tighter, which will negatively impact access to this specialty care for British Columbians. The results of the survey are in the April issues of the *BC Medical Journal* (www.bcmj.org)

The online survey, conducted by the BC Society of Rheumatologists (BCSR), was distributed to all 50 practicing rheumatologists with a 98% response rate. The key findings showed that 23.4% plan to retire within five years, and another 27.7% plan to retire within ten years – representing a loss of 24 clinical rheumatologists.

"These retirement figures are something that we all need to be concerned about," said Dr. Jason Kur, president of the BCSR, clinical assistant professor in the Division of Rheumatology at the University of British Columbia, and co-author of the *BCMJ* cover story. "This problem is compounded by the fact that BC loses more rheumatologists each year than it can recruit."

Compared to the national average, not only are BC's rheumatologists older but this province also has fewer new rheumatologists entering practice. The reasons for the declining number of physicians choosing to practice rheumatology in BC include the inequality of remuneration of rheumatologists compared to other specialties, at 51% their overhead is one of the highest rates, and too few training positions are available in UBC's medical school.

However, early positive steps have begun. The 2009 Physician Master Agreement between the BC Medical Association and the provincial government included provisions for the allocation of funding specifically to recruit and retain physician specialties that are considered in short supply and to support the delivery of high quality specialty care in British Columbia. Rheumatologists will receive \$1.7 million to tackle their physician shortage concerns for 2011/2012.

Rheumatologists are subspecialists within internal medicine who have nine years of medical education and care for patients with inflammatory diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, inflammatory destruction of blood vessels, joint disease of the spinal column, and osteoarthritis.