

Shortage of Vascular Surgeons

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The current worldwide financial crisis is a stark example of what happens when there is lack of oversight and inattention to long-term planning. A similar storm is rapidly brewing in health care, especially for patients with vascular disease. There are 76 million baby boomers, individuals born between 1946 and 1964. By 2030, all baby boomers will have reached 65 years of age, and one-fifth of our United States citizens will be over age 65. Unfortunately, there will not be enough physicians to treat them.

It takes an average of 10 years to produce a physician; we are only producing 25,000 per year, and it has been estimated that we will face a shortage of 50,000 physicians by 2010. Increasing age is a major risk factor for vascular disease, and nearly all health care analysts agree that even with improvements in lifestyle and medical therapy, the sheer force of demographics will drive an increase in those needing care for vascular disease. In 1992, about 600,000 peripheral vascular operations were performed in the United States. It has been estimated that by 2020, anywhere from 1 to 1.8 million vascular operations will be performed. Vascular surgeons are the only specialists trained to provide comprehensive, long-term care for patients with vascular disease, including non-invasive diagnosis, medical management, catheter-based and open surgical interventions. The Society for Vascular Surgery leadership has projected that we will need to double the number of vascular surgeons over the next decade to meet societal needs.

Vascular surgery was recently recognized as a Primary Specialty by the American Board of Medical Specialties. This important milestone was achieved based upon recognition of the high level of expertise and profound societal need for doctors who are trained to do what vascular surgeons have learned to do over the last 60 years of the evolution of the specialty. The Primary Specialty designation has allowed the specialty to begin to change our training paradigms; there are currently 106 standard training programs that require seven years of advanced training. But, with the establishment of the Primary Certificate, there are currently 16 programs that will allow completion of dedicated training in vascular surgery in only five years following medical school and there are many more in the pipeline. The primary purpose of these programs is to more rapidly produce necessary vascular specialists in response to the need for them and to further increase the attractiveness of our specialty to trainees by providing opportunities for earlier and more focused training in vascular disease.

Bright high school and college students who want to enter a secure profession should consider a career in medicine, a career in which they can have a major impact on society. Medical students should consider a career in vascular surgery. It is a rapidly evolving, interesting, challenging and rewarding career path.

To learn more about your vascular health and find a vascular surgeon visit VascularWeb.org.