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[Arvind R. Cavale: Pa. has too few doctors and a Trump policy will lose us more](#)

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How far away is your nearest doctor? How long do you have to wait and how many offices do you have to call before you are able to snag an appointment with that doctor?

For many Pennsylvanians, the answer is: too far, too long, too many.

A nationwide shortage

This isn't because physicians don't want to take on new patients or expand their practices into underserved communities. We do. Rather, these are symptoms of a nationwide shortage of doctors that is pushing our healthcare system to the brink.

In December, the federal government estimated that the United States will suffer a shortage of more than 113,000 doctors by 2028. Pennsylvania alone will be short by nearly 5,000 physicians. Roughly half the medical students who train here will go on to practice outside of the state.

And it's not just a frustrating lack of primary care clinicians who can help catch conditions early before they get worse. The U.S. is also facing a major shortfall of specialists like pediatricians, cardiologists, endocrinologists and rheumatologists, which will make it even more difficult to receive specialized care in the coming years.

To address this looming crisis, we're seeing a number of efforts to graduate more locally trained physicians. Promising initiatives include Indiana University of Pennsylvania's proposal to launch a college of osteopathic medicine, which is getting closer to becoming reality. Another is Drexel University College of Medicine's accelerated medical degree program, which will graduate practice-ready physicians faster than traditional pathways.

Meanwhile, Medicare created 400 new residency slots for medical students nationwide to train, another step in the right direction.

But all of this requires time, and Pennsylvanians who are sick today can't wait for these efforts to bear fruit. That's why it's critical that we act now to attract top talent to our state.

A fee healthcare can't afford

International medical professionals — whether they completed their training at American training programs or have mastered their field abroad — represent a vital pathway out of this crisis. Today, one in four doctors practicing in the U.S. is originally from another country. They come here to build deep roots with U.S. communities and help us live longer, healthier lives.

Unfortunately, recently enacted federal rules have created serious barriers that prevent Pennsylvania's hospitals, clinics and private practices from hiring trained medical professionals who were born abroad. A September Presidential Proclamation intended to boost the American workforce, instituted a \$100,000 fee that employers looking to hire skilled workers must pay when applying for an H-1B visa.

This hampers the ability of training programs and employers to sponsor physicians who are fluent in English and want to serve American communities. On top of this, the federal government has also frozen work authorization extensions for international doctors already practicing in the U.S., meaning that a significant number of Americans have suddenly lost access to local care.

Such policies make the nationwide physician shortage even worse, especially in rural and high-poverty communities, which tend to be served by a higher proportion of physicians on H-1B visas.

Local clinics cannot shoulder the burden of a \$100,000 visa filing fee when they are already struggling to stay open. Trainees will have to leave to either return home or seek work in countries like Canada and the United Kingdom.

Ultimately, the failure to attract top-tier talent to Pennsylvania will drastically limit patients' care options and drive up appointment wait times.

A legislative fix

The impact of these policies will be felt nationwide. That's why the entire medical community is united in our call for lawmakers to support a legislative fix to make it easier for international medical professionals to practice here.

The H-1Bs for Physicians and the Healthcare Workforce Act (H.R. 7961) would exempt physicians from the onerous \$100,000 filing fee for international medical graduates on new H-1B visa petitions. The bipartisan bill would also exempt other vital healthcare professionals who are experiencing shortages — including nurses, pharmacists, physical therapists and other allied health professionals involved in direct patient care.

If policymakers don't act to increase the number of physicians in the U.S., the future of healthcare will be bleak. It's critical that Washington remove undue burdens that prevent qualified international medical graduates from treating patients throughout Pennsylvania and the entire United States of America.

Arvind R. Cavale is the president of the Pennsylvania Medical Society.