# Survey: Use of Temporary Physicians on the Rise

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Demand for temporary physicians, known as "locum tenens" positions, is rising, according to a survey of temporary physicians and the hospitals and health groups that employ them.

The findings suggest that there has been a shift in the reasons for hiring staff on a temporary basis.

"Historically, locum tenens doctors have been used to hold a place for ill, vacationing, or otherwise absent doctors pending their return. Today, national doctor shortages have prompted hospitals, medical groups, and others to use temporary doctors to maintain services in lieu of permanent doctors, who may be difficult to find," according to the survey, which was conducted by Staff Care Inc., a company that matches temporary health care providers with medical institutions.

The number of facilities using locum tenens physicians rose from 72% in 2009 to 85% in 2010. Meanwhile, a slightly higher percentage of locum tenens physicians (33%) reported having less than 1 year of experience in 2010, compared with those in 2009 (30%), suggesting that locum tenens is attracting new physicians, according to the survey.

Demand was higher for physicians in certain specialties, especially in behavioral health, which topped the list for the type of temporary physicians requested most by health care groups, at 22%.

Primary care physicians were the next most requested (20%), and temporary physicians were used to fill internal medicine slots in 12% of the cases.

The company surveyed 626 locum tenens physicians and 105 groups that

use temporary physicians, via e-mail, from August to November of 2010.

Staff Care estimates that 30,000-40,000 physicians worked on a locum tenens basis in 2010.

"This number could grow significantly in the next several years as health reform and other challenges push physicians to seek alternative practice styles," according to the survey.

Dr. Robert T. London, who has been practicing psychiatry for 35 years, said that he regularly receives calls from staffing agencies for locum tenens opportunities.

"It pays very [well]. They provide you with room and board and sometimes a car. … Some people seem to like it," he said in an interview.

Dr. London, who practices in New York City and is not a locum tenens physician, said that being a temporary physician is sometimes a good opportunity for older physicians who no longer want to work full time.

Among surveyed locum tenens physicians, the top reasons for working on a temporary basis were the ability to have freedom and flexibility and not to have to deal with medical politics.

Being away from home and the uncertainty of the assignments were the top two drawbacks.

Groups that hired temporary physicians listed continuity of care and prevention of revenue loss as the top two benefits of bringing in locum tenens providers.

Cost and lack of familiarity with the department or practice were the top two drawbacks.

Among the other survey findings were the following:

► In all, 41% of facilities were seeking locum tenens physicians in 2010, up from 40% in 2009. The slight uptick may suggest "that the downturn in physician utilization caused by the recession may be reversing," according to the survey.

► Locum tenens physicians are mostly accepted by patients, colleagues, and administrators.

► Of groups that hired locum tenens physicians, 84% said that bringing them to their facility was "worth the cost," compared with 79% in 2009.

► Some 55% of health care groups reported using one to three locum tenens physicians in a typical month; 37% reported using none, 7% reported using four to six, and 1% reported using seven or more.

► Of the physicians who were surveyed, 80% said that they find working on a locum tenens basis to be as satisfying as or more satisfying than conventional practice.

**The number of locum tenens physicians 'could grow significantly in the next several years as health reform and other challenges push physicians to seek alternative practice styles.'**

► Overall, 60% of the physicians said they plan to practice on a locum tenens basis for more than 3 years.

► The largest percentage of locum tenens physicians (28%) reported primary care as their specialty.

► In all, 68% of the physicians reported having 21 or more years of experience; 16% had 11-20 years; 7% had 6-10 years; 7% had 1-5 years, and 2% had less than 1 year.

► Some 63% of the physicians surveyed reported taking on one to three locum tenens assignments per year, 19% reported taking on four to six assignments annually, and 18% took on seven or more. ■