

Data Show Smaller, Younger Physician Workforce

BY JANE ANDERSON

More young physicians are entering the workforce than previously thought while fewer older physicians are remaining active, making the physician workforce younger on average, both now and in the future, a recent study of census data showed.

The workforce analysis, which challenges conclusions drawn from the American Medical Association (AMA) Physician Masterfile dataset that is commonly used to calculate physician workforce numbers, ultimately could indicate ways to make the Masterfile data more accurate, according to the study's lead author, Douglas O. Staiger, Ph.D., the John French Professor of Economics at Dartmouth College in Hanover, N.H.

"Workforce projections rely on accurate estimates of the current number of physicians as a starting point," Dr. Staiger said in an interview. "Without more ac-

curate estimates of the size and age distribution of the current workforce, projections of physician supply, requirements, and potential shortages may mislead policy makers as they try to anticipate and prepare for the health care needs of the population," Dr. Staiger said in an interview.

The study compared physician workforce estimates and supply projections using AMA Masterfile data with estimates

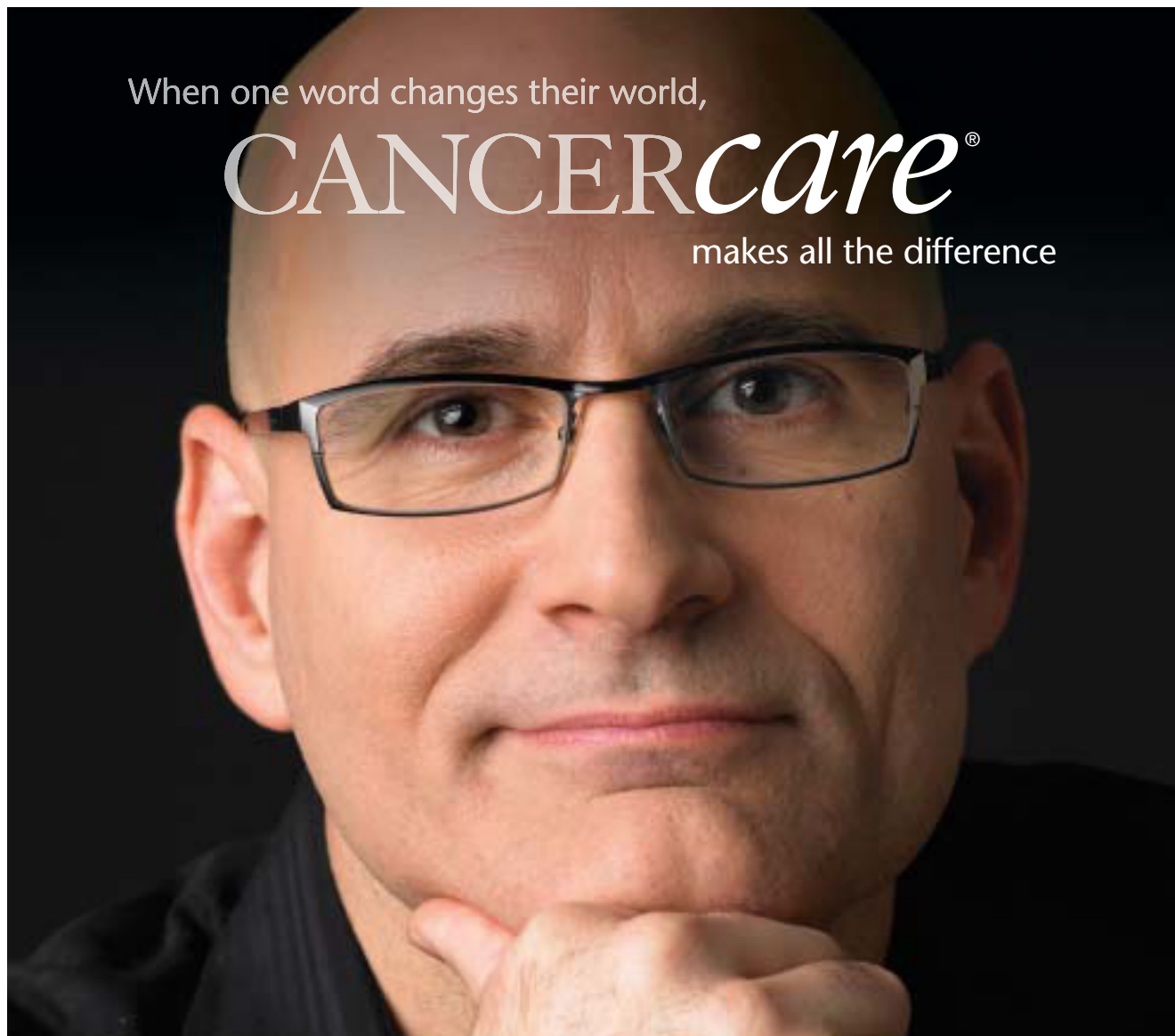
and projections from the U.S. Census Bureau Current Population Survey (CPS).

The analysis showed that in an average year, the census data estimated 67,000 (or 10%) fewer active physicians than did the AMA's Masterfile, almost entirely because the census data found fewer active physicians aged 55 years and older. The census data estimated up to 17,000 more physicians aged 25-34 years than did the Masterfile (JAMA 2009;302:1674-80).

Projections using the AMA's Masterfile indicate that there will be about 1,050,000 physicians in practice in 2020, whereas census data estimates indicate that there will be only 957,000 physicians in practice then, with a smaller percentage older than age 65.

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