Medical Schools Boast Largest Enrollment Ever

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The number of students entering medical school this fall—17,759—is the highest ever, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges.

While that number represents only a 2.3% increase from the previous year, there was an 8% increase in applicants, with 42,300 seeking to enter medical school in 2007.

It was the fourth consecutive year in which the number of applicants was on the rise, after a 6-year decline.

In a briefing with reporters, AAMC President Darrell G. Kirch said that the continuing increase in applicants and enrollees shows "that the interest in medicine runs very strong in our country."

Applicants and enrollees are more diverse than ever, according to the AAMC. While the number of applicants who identified themselves as white or white combined with another ethnicity—26,916—still dwarfs other races, there was an increase in the number of minority applicants.

There were 2,999 applicants who identified themselves as Latino or Hispanic alone or in combination with another race, 3,471 African American/combination applicants, and 9,225 Asian/combination applicants.

The number of black and Hispanic male applicants rose by 9.2%, which was larger than the growth of the overall applicant pool, according to the AAMC. Ultimately, black male acceptance and enrollment increased by 5.3%, and Hispanic male acceptance remained even with 2006 levels.

There was an almost-even split among men and women applicants and enrollees. Men slightly edged out women, accounting for 51% of applicants and 51.7% of enrollees.

Eleven of the 126 medical schools increased their class size by more than 10%: Michigan State University (47% increase), Texas A&M University System (24%), University of Arizona (22%), Florida State University (19%), Emory University (14%), Mount Sinai School of Medicine (14%), University of California, Davis (13%), Joan C. Edwards School of Medicine at Marshall University (12%), and Drexel University, Howard University, and University of Minnesota (10% each). Some of the increase in enrollment came through added capacity—both Michigan State and Arizona opened additional campuses.

Six universities are currently seeking accreditation for a medical school, said Dr. Kirch.

The rise in applicants and enrollment represents some light at the end of the tunnel, he said. The AAMC and other organizations have warned of looming physician shortages.

Depending on the estimates used, there will be a shortfall of 55,000-90,000 physicians across all specialties by 2020.

The AAMC has pushed for a 30% increase in enrollment by 2015, said Dr. Kirch. He acknowledged that it can be difficult to accurately predict shortages, noting that medical school enrollment has waxed and waned over the years.

Even so, despite the many current challenges of being a physician—including a patchwork health care system and unpredictable reimbursement picture—it's still seen as an attractive career choice, Dr. Kirch said.

"What I think is most striking here is to see the draw that medicine still has despite those environmental forces," he said. "I personally view this as a reflection that there are few careers that can be as meaningful, as fulfilling as pursuing medicine," he added. ■