Emergency Medicine as a Top Pediatric Subspecialty

BY CHRISTINE KILGORE

Pediatric emergency medicine has grown to become the third most popular pediatric subspecialty choice, but experts say the reasons are unclear.

Since 1997, the year in which the American Board of Pediatrics (ABP) began tracking subspecialty fellows in all training programs, the number of fellows enrolled in pediatric emergency medicine (EM) programs has increased by 64%, from 197 fellows in the 1997-1998 training year to 323 fellows in the 2006-2007 training year. Approximately 1,300 physicians are now certified in the subspecialty by the ABP.

The data, which provide a "supply-side" perspective only, were released by the ABP as part of a series on workforce trends.

Dr. Aaron Friedman, who chairs the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on the Pediatric Workforce, said the increasing interest in emergency medicine is not surprising but, on the other hand, it is not well understood.

"This isn't just a pediatric issue. Medical students and residents are receiving [information about emergency medicine] more than they did 10 years ago, and there's speculation about why students are interested in it. Is it [about] lifestyle issues, for instance, or [being on call]? We really don't know," said Dr. Friedman, of Brown University, Providence, R.I. "We also don't know whether going into a pediatrics residency and then going into an emergency medicine subspecialty was a choice these students made initially," he said in an interview.

Research into general pediatrics has shown an increased trend toward primary care work, according to the ABP report, but there "are no current data to indicate this is the case in pediatric emergency medicine."

The percentage of women fellows is at a peak of about 56%, but overall the proportion of male to female physicians in pediatric EM has not changed drastically, wrote report authors Linda A. Althouse, Ph.D., and Dr. James A. Stovall III (J. Pediatr. 2006;149:600-2). Similarly, the percentage of minority physicians is below the national average.

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The ABP's new training data capture emergency medicine physicians as well as pediatricians. However, the report indicates that the pediatric emergency medicine certificate, which the ABP established in collaboration with the American Board of Emergency Medicine more than 15 years ago, is clearly more popular among pediatricians. Whereas the ABP has thus far awarded approximately 170 certificates to emergency medicine physicians, the ABP has certified 1,300 physicians to date, the report says.

Overall, the ABP and ABEM use similar eligibility criteria, and candidates applying to either board are given the same exam. ABEM does require 2 years of fellowship while the ABP requires 3 years, covering an ABEM research requirement, said Lee Currin, manager of credentialing and examinations administration at the ABP.