

Do physicians order more tests today than they used to? Are they prescribing more drugs? Do physicians spend less time with their patients than they once did? Are they ordering too many high-cost diagnostic tests for fear of litigation? These issues are often raised in discussions related to the rising cost of healthcare. Some of them are "myths" that need to be debunked. Some are facts, but we need to understand them in order to find solutions.

In order to evaluate current practices, we used a questionnaire to survey a sample of the physician population in Quebec.

The main purpose of this study was to analyze certain aspects of medical practice in Quebec in terms of five issues:

- laboratory tests or examinations ordered;
- drug prescriptions;
- time spent with each patient;
- items recorded in the patient's file; and
- the frequency of consultations with colleagues.

Other secondary goals to this study were:

- to establish if the hearsay that there has been a dramatic increase in any of these issues was true and, if so, to find out why;
- to evaluate the extent to which litigation or complaints, either targeted at the respondents or at someone in their immediate entourage, had an impact on the increase for measured issues;
- to assess whether the evidence supports the perception that so-called defensive medicine is true.

Overall, we found that:

- 242 respondents reported **no** increase in any of the four out of five issues enumerated in Section 1 of

the questionnaire (consultation with a colleague was left out in this analysis);

- 30 respondents reported an increase in **all** of them;
- 123 respondents in **three** of the four issues;
- 56 respondents in **two** of the four issues;
- Among those who reported an increase in only **one** issue, we found:
 - 78 increases in the time spent recording information in the file;
 - 34 increases in the number of drug prescribed;
 - 30 increases in time spent with the patient;
 - 25 increases in the number of laboratory tests and examinations ordered.

This survey carried with a sample of physicians in Quebec allows us to conduct a more rigorous analysis of current medical practices in Quebec related to the five issues mentioned previously. Primary results shed some light on myths that are perpetuated by healthcare professionals and the media. The myth that laboratory tests and examinations are spiralling out of control is well founded: it is not true. The myth that litigation is widespread persists. Patients have less influence on medical decisions than expected. There is no evidence that physicians are taking a "defensive" stance, but those who have previously been the object of litigation (though not of complaints) tend to err on the side of prudence. We were unable to validate the perception that physicians fail to follow-up on laboratory tests and examinations ordered for the patients. Is this another myth?

The full study (French only) is available on CIRANO's Website at:

<http://www.cirano.qc.ca/pdf/publication/2013RP-10.pdf>