

# Healthy signs: Record number of new docs is good news for East Texas

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If you're looking for some good news, here's a bit of it from the Texas Medical Board: In the fiscal year which ended this past month, the board said Monday, it licensed a record 3,630 new physicians. That was about 500 more new Texas doctors than the average over the past 10 years and 70 percent more than in 2001 and 2002.

The reason for the turnaround? The Texas Medical Association is attributing the increases from the lows a decade ago to tort reform passed by the Texas Legislature in 2003.

It's likely there are many other factors involved as well, but there's no doubt tort reform made for a more favorable business climate for physicians in Texas. The reform put caps on the amount of damages that could be awarded in medical malpractice suits and generally made it tough to successfully file such as suit.

The association also pointed to a new study by University of Texas economics professor Stephen Magee of how the landscape has changed in the past decade. Magee found the number of doctors leaving medical practice doubled from 2000 to 2005, but dropped dramatically as reforms were taking effect.

It also found the number of so-called high-risk specialists grew about 18 percent faster than the state's population from 2005 to 2011. During the same period, the increase in numbers of pediatric sub-specialists, emergency care physicians, cardiologists, vascular surgeons and anesthesiologists outpaced population growth.

That is particularly important, because some of those specialists are finding their way to traditionally under-served areas of the state, such as rural East Texas. In fact, Magee's research found the number of physicians moving to most under-served areas had increased.

To us, that may be the best news.

While it is true larger cities will get the lion's share of doctors and specialists, some specialists and other physicians move to rural areas simply because there are more chances to gain patients and because, frankly, such areas offer a better quality of life.

Though we have been blessed with increasingly sophisticated hospitals and doctors in Longview, the study suggests such shifts now are being felt in more rural areas. Part of the reason for that, of course, is the broadening reach of hospitals like Good Shepherd Medical Center, which is increasingly placing clinics, emergency rooms — and doctors — across East Texas.

So whatever the reason for the increasing numbers of physicians in Texas, we are happy it is so. It is a development that should make all of us feel more secure.