

New Texas doctors set record for state's physician-to-patient ratio

KVEO.com/ Brownsville

February 7, 2020

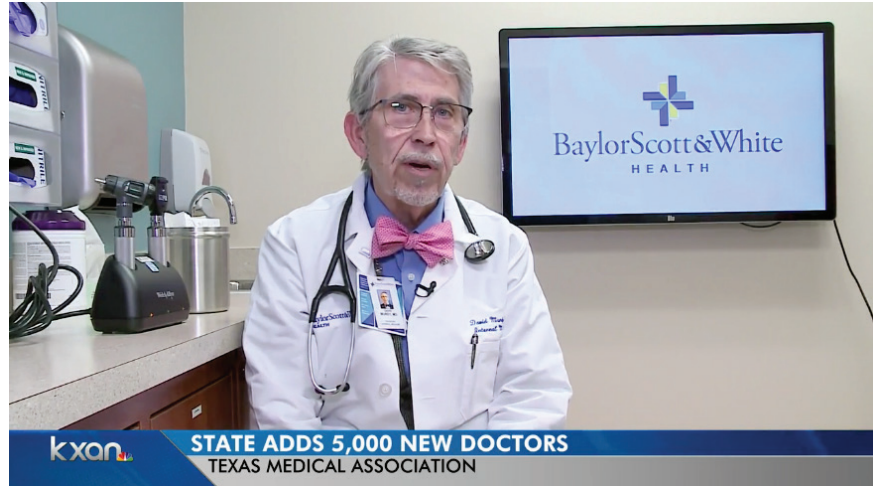
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Posted: Feb 7, 2020 / 08:05 PM CST/ Updated: Feb

10, 2020 / 06:27 PM CST

AUSTIN (Nexstar) — If you're looking for a doctor in Texas, it seems you're in luck.

Texas' physician workforce is expanding at a record-setting pace, according to the Texas Medical Association. The ratio of patient-care physicians for every 100,000 people has increased every year for a decade, new data revealed.



The association reported the state's number of newly licensed physicians bumped up 7.9% last year. Texas added 4,869 new doctors in 2019, which is 355 higher than the 2018 total of 4,514. Based on the new data, there are now nearly 190 physicians for every 100,000 Texans.

"Texas is doing a great job of welcoming new physicians and making it a good environment to practice medicine and take care of people in," said Dr. David Murdy, of Baylor Scott and White Health's Lakeway clinic. Murdy moved to Texas in 2018 from Wisconsin.

The doctor growth in Texas was spurred in 2003 by legislation that changed liability regulations, making it less likely for lawsuits against physicians and hospitals to be sued by patients. That enabling legislation was House Bill 4, the Medical Malpractice and Tort Reform Act, paired with constitutional amendment Proposition 12.

Dr. Stanley Wang, a cardiologist and sleep medicine specialist at Austin Heart, returned to Texas, the state where he went to medical school, after the law change.

"Medical liability was a big problem and the relief of it was a big attraction when I looked at where to go," Wang said. "I think if you look at the statistics since the reforms were enacted, they really show a tremendous increase in the number of physicians coming to Texas, but not only that, the overall rates of physician growth has been higher than the rate of population growth."

According to TMA, the rate of new physicians arriving in the state largely matched Texas' population growth. Over the last decade (2009-2019) the rate of new doctors in Texas exceeded the rate of growth in the state's total population.

"Our success at improving access for our patients is evidenced by the fact that three in four physicians licensed by Texas are from outside the state," Dr. David Fleeger, TMA's president, said.

"Physicians are drawn to Texas as a direct result of our medical liability reform victory," Dr. Fleeger said. "To sustain the improving physician-to-patient ratio, we must continue to advocate to protect that reform."

While the trend means better access to care statewide, Wang and Murdy recognized the growth does not solve the discrepancy between urban and rural healthcare.

"It's just farther to get to specialists and it's farther to get to hospitals," Murdy said. "It's harder to have a concentration of specialties or high levels of services in disparate rural parts of West Texas in particular."

"We still have some very under served areas in Texas including counties with zero or one doctor," Wang said. "So there's there's some situations that still need to be addressed in terms of position recruitment and availability."

Photojournalist Todd Bynum contributed to this report.