

# Foreign-trained MDs get boost from Quebec

## \$2.4 million a year for pilot project; But coalition representing doctors-in-waiting describes plan as a 'policy of small steps'

BY CHARLIE FIDELMAN, GAZETTE HEALTH REPORTER    JANUARY 16, 2010

MONTREAL – Immigrant doctors shut out of Quebec's medical schools will get a second chance to practise medicine in this province.

Based on recommendations from a committee put in place by his predecessor, Health Minister Yves Bolduc yesterday announced an investment of \$2.4 million annually in a pilot project aimed at integrating foreign-trained doctors with in-hospital training.

But the head of a coalition of foreign-trained doctors called it "a policy of small steps" but "it's not enough," said Dr. Comlan Amouzou.

"We have doctors coming here, passing qualifying exams and then they can't practise because they can't be accepted into residence programs." Last year, 145 foreign-trained doctors applied for a residency - a paid hospital position that is the last step to gain a licence to practise medicine in this province. Of those, 51 were granted entry. That's down from the 68 accepted a year earlier.

In comparison, Ontario accepted 176 immigrant doctors into its hospital residency programs.

Immigrant doctors have long complained of costly and bureaucratic requirements imposed on them before they can practise in Quebec.

There are 300 foreign-trained MDs who have passed their exams and who are poised to leave Quebec "because it's a waste of time," Amouzou said. "I have friends who have left for jobs in Manitoba, to the detriment of Quebec patients." Thousands of Quebecers do not have a family doctor yet residence positions remain vacant year after year - including 94 this year, representing more than two-thirds of Canada's 126 unfilled positions.

That's what the pilot project aims to remedy, said Dr. Richard Levin, chair of the Canadian residence matching service and dean of medicine at McGill University.

A total of 65 residence positions, mostly in family medicine, will be reserved annually for immigrant doctors at Quebec's four medical schools.

Those who fail to get a residency will be eligible for a six-month retraining program in basic medicine at St. Mary's or Verdun hospitals. Participants course fees will be covered. They can then reapply.

A six-month investment is significant. It is based on similar programs in Ontario and the U.S., and it is aimed at improving immigrant doctors' ability to integrate, Levin said.

"We have a problem and we are trying to correct it in a way of increasing the international medical graduate in our residency program ... and into our health care system. I would not call that a small step," Levin said.

The program is designed to provide training and assessment for foreign MDs who were not successful in applying for a residence in Quebec universities, he said.

"Imagine a doctor, fully licenced in her own country, a practising neurosurgeon, who has been away from medicine for a long time through no fault of her own. And it's taken five years to immigrate to Quebec, to establish herself to pass all the required examinations and in those five years - since medical knowledge doubles every seven years - the world has changed.

"She maybe perfectly capable of buffing up her medical knowledge ... but that five-year hiatus may prove to be insurmountable when this international medical graduate is applying against the very high standards of our four faculties," Levin said.

Philip Couillard, health minister at the time Amouzou's coalition had complained of unfair practices, responded by setting up a committee headed by Dr. Vincent Échavé of Sherbrooke University.

Released yesterday, the Échavé report cast a rigorous look at the problem of foreign trained doctors in Quebec.

What took so long? demanded Jean Gouin, director-general of the 3,000-member Quebec federation of medical residents: "We made the same recommendations five years ago," he said.

The coalition is still awaiting results of a Quebec Human Rights Commission investigation into medical schools' practice of refusing immigrant candidates for residency positions.

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