

POLICY & POLITICS

Immigration bill could fast-track IMGs

Foreign-trained doctors warn the changes
won't speed licensing

By Sam Solomon

Controversial immigration law amendments that would fast-track foreign-trained physicians and other skilled professionals have received tentative support from major national doctor groups.

The amendments have faced criticism, however, both from within Parliament and from outside. Two of the largest Canadian international medical graduate (IMG) organizations — which represent the very group the amendments purport to help — have expressed serious concern about aspects of the proposed changes in interviews with *NRM*.

BARRIERS REMAIN

Two major national medical groups have both offered endorsements, albeit lukewarm ones, to the amendments.

"Generally we would support anything that facilitates qualified health-care professionals being able to come to Canada," Dr Calvin Gutkin, College of Family Physicians of Canada executive director, told the *Toronto Sun*. Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada CEO Dr Andrew Padmos was quoted as saying that anything that would help recruiting is "clearly welcome."

But both Dr Gutkin and Dr Padmos also warned that simple changes in the way immigration requests are prioritized, as the new amendments suggest, would be insufficient to address the nation's physician shortage. The hope is that immigration might help forestall the worst side effects of our physician shortage, but there have been suggestions that that might be chimerical given the small number of IMGs who actually get licensed to practise in Canada.

"Every time I ask a cabbie in Toronto their profession," Naeem (Nick) Noorani, the publisher of *The Canadian Immigrant Magazine*, wrote recently, "most of them say they are international medical graduates. Doctors. Driving cabs. We have them here — why are we bringing in more? I know a cardiac surgeon who washed dishes in Toronto before literally throwing in the towel and returning to China!"

Dr Joshua Thambiraj, the president of the Association of International Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, who worked in orthopedics in the UK, says immigration isn't a viable solution to the health human resources crunch. "If we bring in more doctors, we will need to look at licensing." He'd rather see the federal government put money towards funding extra residency spots at universities, instead of trying to entice more doctors to come to Canada, only to be stymied once they've arrived. "We feel if there were a clear path to practice, that would solve quite a bit of the problems in regard to the shortage."

"The Canadian government has to be honest ♦ when taking applications from physicians and tell them that their chances ♦ of ever getting licensed are close to none," says Brazilian-born nephrologist Carla Fast, the president of the Association of International Medical Doctors of British Columbia.

Mr Noorani, whose publication recently featured several success stories about immigrant physicians who managed to get licensed in BC and Ontario, agrees. Licensure must be addressed before immigration fast-tracking, he wrote. "Let's first fix this before we ruin more lives of talented, trained professionals! And while they are at it, scrutinize the old boy's clubs that sets restrictive barriers for IMGs [to get] into the professional arena."

PROMISES, PROMISES

At the heart of this matter is the perpetual absence of a workable strategy to solve immigrant physician licensure problems in Canada. After the topic came up during federal-provincial meetings on healthcare planning in 2003 and 2004, the Physician Credentials Registry of Canada was established. The idea was to create a national centre that would simplify and speed up the licensure process, but the registry has since become little more than a centralized method to verify foreign documents. Several provincial Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons are so unimpressed they've elected not to join the system at all. "It finally changed into just a referral centre," says Dr Thambiraj. "That was a sad thing."

Early last year, NDP immigration critic Olivia Chow proposed a new federal agency, this time with a clause requiring provinces to standardize rules about recognizing credentials. Her proposal died a quick death after the Conservative government turned the issue into a jurisdictional blame game. The Tories' own plans to create a more powerful national credentials recognition agency have been tied up in not one but two

multi-million-dollar consultations after they were first mentioned in 2006.

LEGAL SHORTCUTS

Ms Chow has emerged as the current amendments' most fervent critic in Parliament.

She claims the amendments give the government too much power to circumvent immigration guidelines. She has also argued, despite evidence to the contrary, that the true purpose of the amendments is not to bring in more skilled workers like physicians but rather to allow the government to fast-track temporary employees, including those sought out to work the Alberta oil sands. But a spokesperson for Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Diane Finley explained to *NRM* that the bill would only mean a change in the way skilled workers' applications are prioritized, and not a change in the Ministry's "levels plan," which establishes immigration goals for the different classes of immigrants.

The most frequently cited complaint about the amendments in Parliament is essentially a procedural one — that they are buried inside this year's budget implementation bill. Ms Chow has called the tactic "parliamentary trickery." Defeating a budget implementation bill would mean toppling the government — something the Liberals appear to be loath to do at this point. The effect of burying the proposed amendments to the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* inside the budget bill has been to discourage open debate and an open vote on the changes, and to arouse suspicion among immigrant and labour groups.

The bill looks destined to pass, but Ms Chow nevertheless introduced a motion on April 17 that would grant the finance committee, which is currently reviewing the legislation, the power to remove the immigration amendments from the bill. Her motion hasn't yet gone to a vote.