Patients brace for doctor shortage

Specialties will be hardest hit

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Published 7:54 AM EDT Oct 30, 2012

As doctor shortages grow, patient wait times do, too

LAKE WORTH, Fla. —

Naomi Carter needs to see a cardiologist. She had a defibrillator implanted in her chest after a serious scare with congestive heart failure earlier this year.

Monitored by a cardiologist and a company that has hardware to communicate over the phone with her defibrillator, Carter was on track. Until love brought her to South Florida and away from the team in Washington state that was caring for her.

"So far I'm doing OK," said the newlywed, who was in the middle of a six-week wait to see a cardiologist in Florida.

Experts predict that Carter and others like her might have to get used to longer waits as the pool of doctors in South Florida declines.

"You may be told, 'This is a concierge practice,'" said Dr. David Bjorkman, Dean of Florida Atlantic University's Charles E. Schmidt School of Medicine. "Or you may be told, 'Sure we'll be happy to see you, how does March sound?'"

An analysis by the Palm Beach County Medical Society predicted that in four years, the county will have 15 percent fewer doctors than needed. But in some specialties, like vascular surgery and infectious disease, the shortage will approach 60 percent.

"It's got to be more than a financial issue," said the society's president, Dr. Jack Zeltzer, of why a stampede of young doctors isn't rushing to fill the void left by a greying workforce. "It's a dissatisfaction of where the profession has gone in terms of the micro-management. There are many, many other issues to provoke someone to say I'm going to leave money on the table, I just can't take this anymore."