

Doctor situation slightly better, but get one while you still can

By **MICHELLE LANG**

Free Press staff writer

Three young doctors will establish permanent practices in Prince George, helping to alleviate the serious shortage of family physicians here.

But medical officials warn that the city is still in need of at least four general practitioners for the thousands of area residents without a family doctor.

Dr. George Burns and Dr. John Mah, who were working as temporary replacements or locums in the area, have announced their intention to take over the Hart area practices of Dr. Jennifer Law and Dr. Bill Lancashire. Those two doctors have been trying to sell their practices since July of 1998 — with no takers.

In addition, Dr. Garnet Fraser is taking over for Dr. D. Erwin, a long time general practitioner in Prince George who is moving to Victoria.

"They (Burns and Mah) will take any patients in Prince George whose doctors have left or are leaving, until their practices are to capacity.

"For anyone who does not have a family doctor, I would get on the phone to them," says Dr. Peter Gorman, head of the Prince George Regional Hospital's general practice department.

Dr. Gorman estimates the two Hart area practices could

take up to 1,000 patients almost immediately.

All three doctors are graduates of the PGRH residency training program. The program allows medical students to do their residency at the local hospital. Local physicians developed the program with the hopes that it would attract graduates to Northern B.C.

Prince George still needs at least four more family doctors. Dr. Phil Staniland and Dr. Rosemary Baird, both of whom have left their family practice, have not found replacement physicians to buy their practices.

Dr. Norman Byrne and Dr. William Clifford told their patients this week that they will be leaving Prince George in late January.

While physicians traditionally sell their practice before moving on, Dr. Gorman believes many of these

doctors have stopped looking for replacements.

"They've basically given up and are closing their doors," he says. "The (shortage) situation hasn't changed a lot, although I guess it is a little more positive. The situation on the Hart will improve matters and Dr. Erwin's patients will not be left uncared for."

This summer the Northern Interior Regional Health Board forecast a crisis in the

family doctor supply after learning of all the doctors who were leaving without replacements. They estimated 5,000 to 10,000 local patients could be without a family physician within the next year. This is the first-ever shortage of family doctors in Prince George.

Unfortunately, because most local doctors are already at their patient limits, those who lose their family doctor won't likely find another in town.

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