

Doctors: County below state average

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Butte County, with 182,120 people, had 375 doctors and Placer County, with 172,796 people, had 427 physicians, the medical board reported.

"Personally, I don't feel there is any shortage," said Dr. Arani Reddy, president of the Merced-Mariposa County Medical Society.

"There may be some areas on the periphery of the county with a shortage. The city itself is very well-served by physicians."

Reddy speculated that a shortage of physicians may be perceived because of what he said are a lot of doctors who do not accept patients covered by Medi-Cal, the state program designed to provide health care for poor patients.

"It looks like broadly there are more than enough doctors to serve the county or the area," said Reddy, who specializes in in-

ternal medicine, hematology and oncology.

The medical society has 155 members in Merced County.

William Gilbert, administrator at Merced Community Medical Center, said MCMC's problem centers on a shortage of doctors in specialties.

Gilbert said MCMC and the county are experiencing a need for pediatricians, for instance.

He said MCMC could do with two more doctors for children.

He said competition for doctors is intense in California.

Gilbert said it's not so much the money but the lifestyle that attracts a doctor to a community.

A coastal community offers a more attractive lifestyle than Merced, he said.

"More and more doctors are looking at the lifestyle as opposed to money. They are not interested in a one-man practice and being on call all the time."

'Wait until Friday,' doctors' offices say

By REBECCA TAYLOR
Staff Writer

Friday was the quickest any of six physicians could see someone with a "terribly sore neck," their office support personnel said Wednesday.

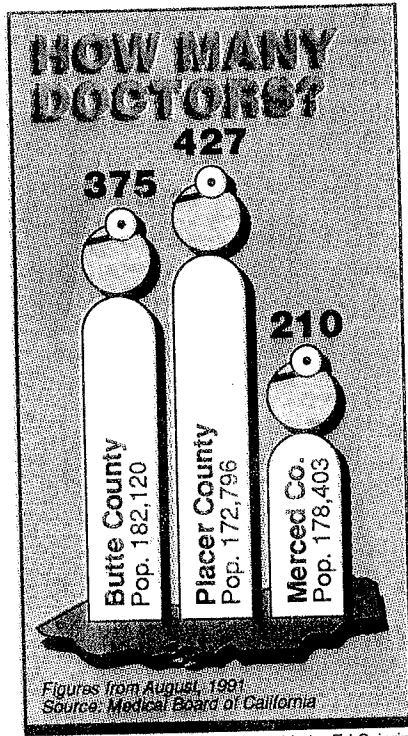
The Merced Sun-Star anonymously contacted six physicians' offices to find out whether they would take new patients and how soon an appointment could be made.

Two doctors' staff members offered a late Friday morning appointment. One said to wait until Tuesday afternoon, and another said the morning of Feb. 7 would be best.

Receptionists at two of the offices said their doctors weren't accepting new patients.

One of the six offices offered the option of a quick appointment with a physician's assistant.

If a physician's assistant wouldn't do, the receptionist said it would be a while before an appointment could be made with the doctor.



Sun-Star graphic by Ed Sciarini

CLINIC: Non-profit facility to offer more on-site care

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those prescriptions will be filled, or that they will be taken as the providers requested."

Some clients have a hard time getting to a pharmacist or, because they cannot speak English, are unable to talk about their prescription with the pharmacist. "We really believe a pharmacy is the kind of program that has to be part and parcel of a good health care system," Sullivan said.

The dental clinic also is a must, Sullivan said, because people who cannot afford dental care or who have no insurance virtually have nowhere to turn. The county will open its new dental clinic on Monday, but will take only patients referred from county indigent health programs and already the line for service is long.

"Oral health is something that the underserved — the poor — either don't get, or put off until it's a take-the-tooth-out situation. That's just not right. Oral health is a very important part of good health care."

To pay for the clinic expansion, Sullivan said it is taking advantage of federal grants and private donations.

The Sierra Foundation gave the clinic \$45,000, specifically toward improving care for low-income, pregnant women. The clinic also used money left over from federal grants. But the greatest portion of funds — about \$300,000 — came in the form of a federal reimbursement for health center services to Medi-Cal and Medicare patients.

Begun in 1989, the Federally Qualified Health Center Program allows the clinic to treat Medicare and Medi-Cal

patients and be reimbursed for the exact cost of those services. Normally, doctors receive only about 60 cents on the dollar for treating patients with the subsidized insurance.

At least 40 percent of the clinic's patients live below the federal poverty level, Sullivan said. Most of those people are eligible for Medi-Cal, but some, because they are recent immigrants or for other reasons, are ineligible. Those patients get a 75 percent discount on services. For working people who come to the clinic, charges are based on a fee scale depending on the patient's income.

"It's not a free clinic," Sullivan said. "We do have minimums and we do expect to get \$15 per visit from patients. To be very honest, we choose not to be very strict. We don't really want to charge people a penny."