

Influx of Doctors Overwhelms Texas Board

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Filed 5:45 p.m. ET

AUSTIN (AP) -- An influx of doctors lured to Texas by new limits on malpractice lawsuits has overwhelmed the state board that screens candidates for medical licenses, creating a backlog that forces many applicants to wait months before they can start seeing patients.

Officials said many of the relocating physicians are filling shortages in areas such as Beaumont, where trauma patients previously had to be flown other cities because there weren't enough surgeons to treat them.

But Austin psychiatrist Dr. James E. Kreisle Jr. said he fears the Texas Medical Board's backlog could prompt some physicians to rethink their decision to move.

Kreisle and his colleagues have been waiting since the fall for two psychiatrists from South Carolina and Georgia to get licensed in Texas so they can join their practice. In the meantime, patients are being forced to wait three weeks for appointments.

The board received 4,000 applications for medical licenses in 2006, up from 2,992 the previous year. Spokeswoman Jill Wiggins said the board expects to approve 2,750 new licenses this year, 235 more than last year. There is a backlog of more than 2,398 applications.

Lawmakers approved \$1.2 million to hire six more employees to process applications more quickly. The board has also hired temporary workers and is paying staffers overtime, but they still can't keep up, Wiggins said.

"The pipeline is just clogged," she said.

Approving an application for a medical license involves verifying the doctor's medical education, doing a criminal background check and other steps. In 2003, it took 45 days to approve the most complex applications and 20 days to approve the simplest, Wiggins said.

Data provided by the board shows it is now taking the agency more than six months to process the most complicated applications, including those that come from out-of-state doctors or veteran doctors who have long histories to be checked. The simplest applications are taking about 41 days to approve.

Wiggins estimated it will take "a little over a year" before the agency's new staffers can bring the applications backlog under control.

"You're turning a battleship around," she said.

Several doctors who moved to Texas from other states said they were drawn by lower malpractice insurance rates.

The average malpractice insurance premiums in Texas have fallen by 21.3 percent since 2003, when lawmakers and voters implemented a \$250,000 cap on non-economic damages such as pain and suffering in malpractice cases, according to Jon Opelt, who leads a group of doctors, hospitals and other health care providers that fought for the changes.

The changes are "a big factor why Texas has become a popular state to practice in," said Dr. Punit Chadha, an oncologist who moved from Chicago to Austin last year. He said his malpractice insurance premium is one-fourth of what it would have been in Chicago.

Dr. Kevin H. Brown, an obstetrician who opened a Round Rock practice with his wife in May, said they paid \$130,000 a year for their malpractice insurance in Georgia. Now, they pay a combined annual premium of \$82,000 a year.

"It was a \$24,000 raise for each of us before we even got started," Brown said.