

Running the Numbers

*A Periodic Feature to Inform North Carolina Healthcare Professionals
about Current Topics in Health Statistics*

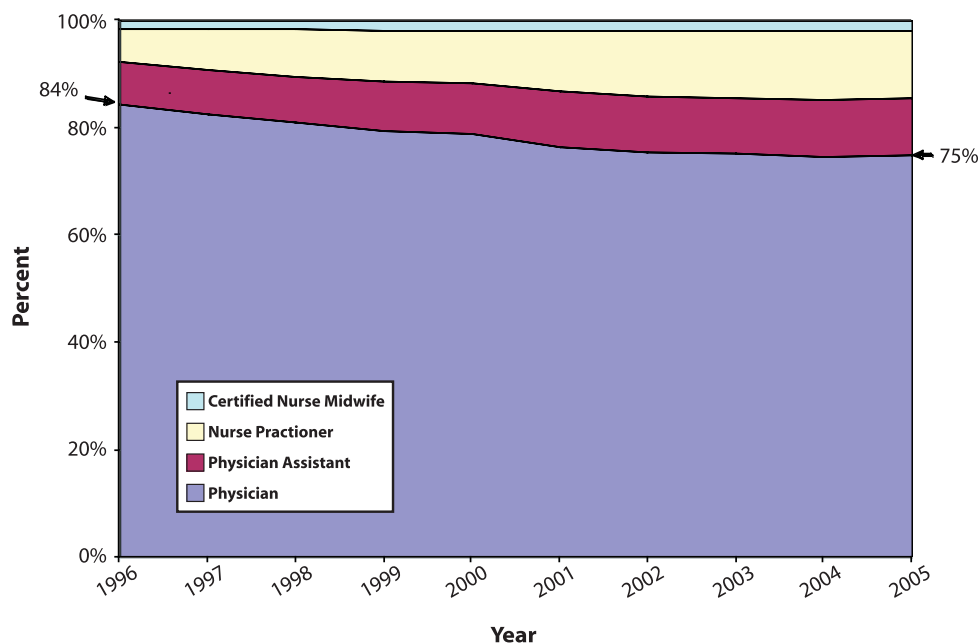
*From the NC Health Professions Data System,
Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
<http://www.shepscenter.unc.edu/hp>*

Practitioner Type and Primary Care Supply Data

As highlighted in this issue's commentary by Barbara Starfield and Leyiu Shi, primary care practitioners are very important to the overall health of populations. Historically, the primary care practitioner from whom most individuals received care was their local general practice physician. However, over time factors have changed the landscape of primary care practice. Today, many individuals receive primary care from nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and certified nurse midwives as well as from physicians. This column will evaluate how the composition of primary care practitioners has changed over time and may vary in communities across North Carolina. For the purposes of this analysis, primary care practitioners are defined as those practitioners who self-designated in their license application a specialty in family and general medicine, obstetrics/gynecology, pediatrics, or internal medicine. However, specialists also may provide particular aspects of primary care such as blood pressure checks and cholesterol screenings.

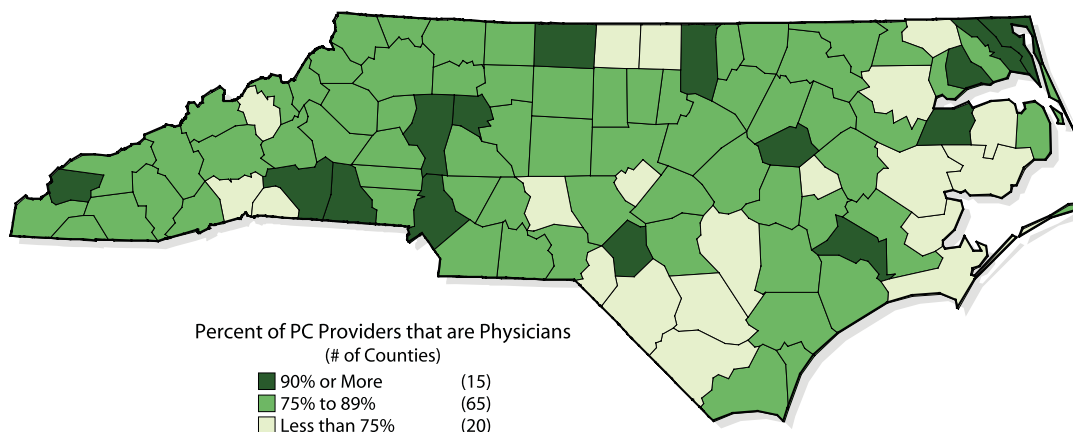
Data from the North Carolina Health Professions Data System show the composition of the primary care practitioner supply from 1996 to 2005. In 1996, 84% of primary care practitioners were physicians. By 2005, physicians accounted for only 75% of all primary care practitioners. This indicates the proportion of nonphysician primary care practitioners increased over 50% during that time period, from 16% to 25% of primary care practitioners.

Figure 1.
Composition of North Carolina Primary Care Practitioner Workforce, by Practitioner Type



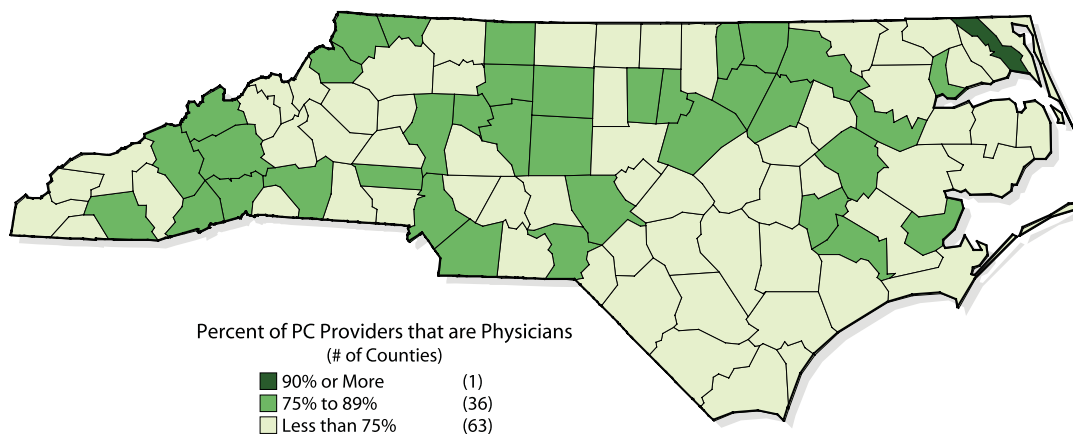
continued on page 212

Map 1.
Percent of Primary Care Practitioners that Were Physicians in 1996, by North Carolina County



Data include active, instate, nonfederal, non-resident-in-training physicians, PAs, NPs and CNMs indicating a primary specialty of family practice, general practice, internal medicine, OB/Gyn or pediatrics. Source: North Carolina Health Professions Data System, Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, with data derived from the North Carolina Midwifery Joint Committee.

Map 2.
Percent of Primary Care Practitioners that Were Physicians in 2005, by North Carolina County



Data include active, instate, nonfederal, non-resident-in-training physicians, PAs, NPs and CNMs indicating a primary specialty of family practice, general practice, internal medicine, OB/Gyn or pediatrics. Source: North Carolina Health Professions Data System, Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, with data derived from the North Carolina Midwifery Joint Committee.

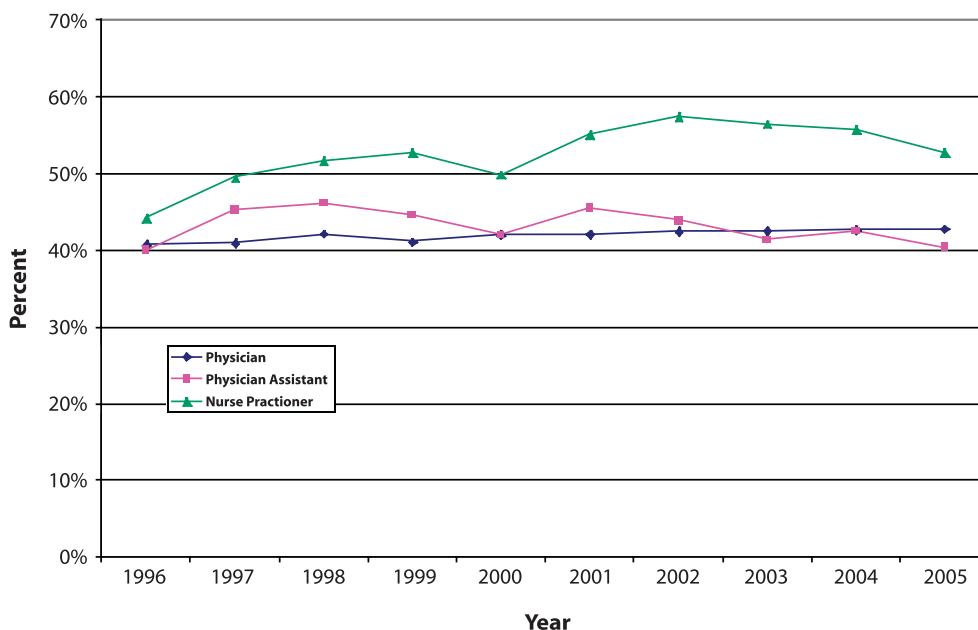
The main factor contributing to this change in the composition of the primary care practitioner workforce is the rapid increase in the number of primary care physician assistants and nurse practitioners relative to the growth in primary care physicians. While the number of primary care physicians grew 36% from 1996 to 2005, the number of primary care physician assistants doubled and primary care nurse practitioners grew 220%.

The distribution of primary care practitioners provides valuable information for policy makers. Data indicate that primary care nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and certified nurse midwives are 50 percent more likely than primary care physicians to practice in rural areas. Furthermore, these practitioners are playing an increasing role in providing primary care services across the state. In 1996, at least 75% of primary care practitioners were physicians in 80 of North Carolina's 100 counties. By 2005, the same was true in less than half (37) of those counties. (Map 1 and Map 2)

The tendency of each discipline to practice primary care changed slightly between 1996 and 2005 (all certified nurse midwives, using the HPDS definition of primary care, practice primary care). The percent of physicians practicing primary care increased slightly from 41% to 43%. Whereas physician assistants' primary care practice increased during the late 1990s, the percent in primary care (40%) was the same in 2005 as it was in 1996. Nurse practitioners generally experienced a steady increase in primary care practice from 1996 to 2002, but a slight transition away from primary care in more recent years. (See Figure 2)

Given the increased reliance of populations in rural areas on nonphysician practitioners for their primary care, trends suggesting a declining tendency of nurse practitioners and physician assistants to practice primary care portend a possible decrease in access to primary care in such communities.

Figure 2.
Composition of North Carolina Primary Care Practitioner Workforce, by Practitioner Type



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