

Practice interruptions were more likely for physicians in 2020 than in 2019, says study

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The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the practice of medicine across the country. Most physicians saw visit volume plummet in March of 2020, only returning to pre-pandemic levels six months later. Anecdotal

evidence suggests that some physicians responded to this upheaval by accelerating retirement plans, closing their practices, or seeking careers outside of clinical medicine.

New research published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* from the University of Minnesota School of Public Health (SPH) and Harvard Medical School provides the first nationwide evidence on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the physician workforce.

"It's important to keep an eye on how pandemic-induced changes in the workforce wind up affecting patients' ability to access care and their health outcomes," said study lead author SPH assistant professor Hannah Neprash. "We know from other research that patients are more likely to use emergency care after they've lost their primary care physician, suggesting that workforce transitions like these affect both the [physicians](#) and their patients."

Neprash and study co-author Michael Chernew of the Harvard Medical School Department of Health Care Policy used Medicare claims data to identify physicians' practice [interruptions](#), defined as more than one month during which they did not treat any Medicare patients in 2019 and 2020, to determine how many physicians experienced temporary or permanent interruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study found that:

- Practice interruptions spiked in April 2020, when 7% of physicians stopped treating Medicare patients.
- 1.1% of all physicians experienced permanent practice interruptions in April 2020, which is four times higher than the usual number from previous years.
- Physicians 55 and older were much more likely to experience

practice interruptions in April 2020 than younger physicians (9% vs. 5%) and these practice interruptions were more likely to be permanent.

"Physicians experienced more practice interruptions in 2020 than in 2019 and the pandemic appears to have impeded return to practice more for older physicians than for younger physicians, suggesting that these were probably retirements," said Neprash.

The study findings suggest that the COVID-19 [pandemic](#) had a profound effect on the physician workforce, potentially precipitating an unusually high number of retirements. The researchers say that further study will be crucial to understanding the long-term effects on doctors and their patients.

More information: Hannah T. Neprash et al, Physician Practice Interruptions in the Treatment of Medicare Patients During the COVID-19 Pandemic, *JAMA* (2021). [DOI: 10.1001/jama.2021.16324](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2021.16324)

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