

South Korean doctors rally against government plans to increase the number of medical students

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Doctors stage a rally against the government's medical policy near the presidential office in Seoul, South Korea, Thursday, Feb. 15, 2024. Hundreds of South Korean doctors rallied in the capital, Seoul, and other cities on Thursday in protest of a government plan to boost the number of medical students in the country. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon

Hundreds of South Korean doctors rallied in the capital, Seoul, and other cities on Thursday against a government plan to boost the number of medical students.

Doctors' groups say increasing the number of medical students by 2,000 starting in 2025 is too steep. They want officials to instead use available resources to raise medical fees they say are set too low.

Authorities say South Korea needs more doctors. It's among the lowest numbers of doctors relative to the size of the population among developed countries despite growing demands for medical services fueled by a fast-aging society.

South Korea also has one of the world's lowest birth rates and has been grappling with shortages of doctors in some key professions, including obstetrics and pediatrics, and in rural regions outside the greater capital area.

South Korea's quota of medical students has stood at 3,058 since 2006. Doctors have successfully resisted several government attempts to increase the number of students in past years, including during the COVID-19 pandemic.

While doctors' groups have threatened strikes, the Health Ministry has downplayed the possibility of huge walkouts that would disrupt [medical services](#).

Hundreds of doctors marched amid rain in streets in front of Seoul's presidential office, holding banners and signs that read "We oppose with our lives an increase in [medical students](#) without consent of the medical sector." Similar protests were held nationwide.

"If the government wants doctors to work for the crucial sectors like

obstetrics or pediatrics, they should build legal safety net and increase medical fee first so that the doctors in those sectors wouldn't feel pressured to be sued over accidents or be burdened by heavy workloads," said Joo Sooho, former president of Korea Medical Association.

While the government plans to meet with doctors' groups to address their concerns, it has no intentions to adjust the scale and timing of the medical student increase, Second Vice Health Minister Park Min-soo said during a briefing Thursday.

In an editorial published Thursday, the Korea JoongAng Daily newspaper said a strike by [doctors](#) would attract little public support.

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