Saskatchewan courts its specialists with cash

Saskatchewan is investing $14 million in an attempt to reverse a critical shortage of medical specialists such as endocrinologists, pediatric surgeons and neurosurgeons.

Local specialists cite problems such as inadequate operating room time, insufficient compensation for teaching and a lack of support staff as reasons for leaving. Five anesthetists left the province in January, forcing a 25% cut in surgery at the Royal University Hospital in Saskatoon. “We certainly have a critical shortage in some areas,” says Dr. Martin Vogel, president of the Saskatchewan Medical Association.

In December the SMA negotiated several incentive programs for specialists as part of a 3-year contract with Saskatchewan Health. It includes $8.5 million to increase the fees for underpaid specialists such as pediatricians and psychiatrists, and an extra $1.5 million for recruitment. In addition, the SMA is negotiating compensation for on-call specialists. A special committee will decide how the money will be allocated.

Saskatchewan has also established a $4-million fund to reward physicians who remain in the province for the long term. “This program costs the government nothing if it doesn’t work,” notes Vogel. SMA Executive Director Briane Scharfstein says a joint SMA-govern-ment committee will determine how the bonuses will be awarded and their size.

After Alberta doctors negotiated a fee increase in January that made them among the highest paid in the country, fears were raised that Saskatchewan’s new retention measures would not be attractive enough. “It’s very difficult for provinces that are not in the same financial position as Alberta,” said Pat Atkin-

son, then Saskatchewan minister of health. “Getting into a bidding war with each other doesn’t really address some of the fundamental problems.”

Vogel says the new incentives will take time to work. “This is part of a long-term solution. It is not a Band-Aid.” — Amy Jo Ebman, Saskatoon