A University of Nebraska Medical Center study has found that Nebraska is woefully lacking in primary care physicians across the state. The shortage is even more dramatic in rural parts of the state.

“The number of primary care physicians in Nebraska is 30 percent lower than previously reported by the American Medical Association (AMA) and rural areas are hit the hardest,” said Jim Stimpson, Ph.D., director of the Center for Health Policy in the UNMC College of Public Health and co-author of the report.

“This is alarming in light of the thousands of people who will be entering the system seeking care as a result of the health care reform law,” he said.

Dr. Stimpson said currently there are 1,410 primary care physicians in Nebraska. It’s anticipated that the state will need 1,685 primary care physicians to meet the increased demand resulting from health care reform by 2014.

The study, which compared national data from the AMA, to that collected by the UNMC Health Professions Tracking Service (HPTS), determined that there are 63 primary care physicians per 100,000 residents, as compared to 84 as reported by the AMA.

And of the 93 counties in Nebraska, 11–all rural–do not have a primary care physician, Dr. Stimpson said.

Another alarming finding, he said, is the number of primary care physicians older than 65 has grown by 78 percent in the past five years. As these physicians start to retire, Dr. Simpson said, it will add significantly to the overall shortage of primary care physicians in the state.

The study focused on primary care specialties in four categories: family medicine, internal medicine, pediatrics and obstetrics/gynecology.

“The HPTS data provides a very clear picture of the number of health care providers in the state, not just in the number of physicians working, but also in actual working hours and place of work,” Dr. Stimpson said. The HPTS has been tracking health professionals in the state for 17 years since it began in 1995.

While the AMA data might report a physician available in two rural counties, the reality is that more often than not one physician is covering both counties with a practice in one and satellite office in the other, he said.

“Policy makers need accurate and timely data on the current and projected supply of health care workers as they make decisions that affect the delivery of health care,” Dr. Stimpson said.

On a positive note, Dr. Stimpson said the study found that ethnic diversity among primary care physicians increased by seven percent in the past five years. Also, the ratio of women to men shifted over the past five years with women comprising an 11 percent higher share of the primary care physician workforce.

Read the full study at: http://www.unmc.edu/publichealth/docs/PCPsinNebraska.pdf.