StarTribune **ALL SECTIONS SUBSCRIBE** LOG IN Classifieds Sports Opinion Variety Housing Home Local Business Obituaries Autos Jobs MORE FROM THE HOMEPAGE patients deny Minneapolis sports bar and comedy More COVID-19 restrictions likely in Legislators clas right up until club closed by fire reporting amid Minnesota, Walz says **MINNEAPOLIS** Doctors are calling it quits under stress of the pandemic Thousands of medical practices have closed in recent months. By Reed Abelson New York Times NOVEMBER 15, 2020 — 7:20PM **Top Stories** More COVID-19 restrictions likely in Minnesota, Walz says LIMANIE 5:19am Legislators clash over JENN ACKERMAN - NEW YORK TIMES COVID-19 reporting amid Dr. Kelly McGregory, who had to close down her private pediatric practice outside outbreak Minneapolis because of the pandemic, at home in Plymouth, Minn., Oct. 21, 2020. "It was devastating," McGregory said. "That was my baby." 5:22am Two years ago, Dr. Kelly McGregory opened her own pediatric practice Severed feet of four bald AA TEXT SIZE just outside Minneapolis, where she could spend as much time as she eagles, other raptors found in wanted with patients and parents could get all of their questions answered. Woodbury But just as her practice was beginning to thrive, the coronavirus hit the 25 minutes ago United States and began spreading across the country. "As an independent practice with no real connection to a big health **EMAIL** system, it was awful," McGregory said. **Most Read PRINT** At one point, she had only three surgical masks left and worried that she could no longer safely treat patients. Families were also staying away, Rep. Omar severs financial ties with MORE husband's political firm • MINNEAPOLIS concerned about catching the virus. "I did some telemedicine, but it wasn't enough volume to really replace Minneapolis residents still split on police as council considers budget for next year what I was doing in the clinic," she said. MINNEAPOLIS After her husband found a new job in a different state, McGregory, 49, State asks judge to reconsider permission made the difficult decision to close her practice in August. for audio, video coverage of officers' trial in George Floyd killing • MINNEAPOLIS "It was devastating," she said. "That was my baby." Democrats debate 'defund' movement's Many other doctors are also calling it quits. Thousands of medical cost at polls · MINNEAPOLIS practices have closed during the pandemic, according to a July survey of 3,500 doctors by the Physicians Foundation, a nonprofit group. About 8% Minneapolis to consider bringing in outside of the doctors reported closing their offices in recent months, which the police officers amid shortage foundation estimated could equal some 16,000 practices. Another 4% said MINNEAPOLIS they planned to shutter within the next year. Other doctors and nurses are retiring early or leaving their jobs. Some worry about their own health because of age or a medical condition that puts them at high risk. Others stopped practicing during the worst of the outbreaks and don't have the energy to start again. Some simply need a break from the toll that the pandemic has taken among their ranks and their patients. Another analysis, from the Larry A. Green Center with the Primary Care Collaborative, a nonprofit group, found similar patterns. Nearly a fifth of primary care clinicians surveyed in September say someone in their practice plans to retire early or has already retired because of COVID-19, and 15% say someone has left or plans to leave the practice. The clinicians also painted a grim picture of their lives, as the pandemic enters a newly robust phase with record U.S. case counts. About half already said their mental exhaustion was at an all-time high. Many worried about keeping their doors open: About 7% said they were not sure they could remain open past December without financial help. For some, family obligations left them no choice. "Honestly, if it hadn't been for the pandemic, I would have still been working because it was not my plan to retire at that point," said Dr. Joan Benca, 65, who worked as an anesthesiologist in Madison, Wisconsin. But her daughter and son-in-law hold administrative positions in a hospital intensive care unit, treating the sickest COVID patients, and they have two small children. When cases climbed in the spring, their day care center closed, and Benca's daughter desperately needed someone she trusted to look after the children. "It wasn't the way I wanted to end my career," Benca said. "I think for most of us, we would say, you would fall on your sword for your family but not for your job," she said, adding that she knows other female colleagues who have stayed home to care for children or older relatives. Dr. Michael Peck, 66, an anesthesiologist in Rockville, Maryland, decided to leave after working in April in the hospital's intensive care unit, intubating critically ill patients, and worrying about his own health. "When the day was over, I just said, 'I think I'm done' — I want to live my life, and I don't want to get ill," said Peck, who had already been cutting back his hours. He is now spending a few hours a day as the chief medical officer for a startup. Still, most practices have proved resilient. The Paycheck Protection Program — authorized by Congress to help businesses, including medical practices, with the economic fallout of the pandemic — helped many doctors remain afloat. That money "kind of made me solid," said Dr. Ripley Hollister, a family physician in Colorado Springs, Colorado, who serves as chairman of the research committee for the Physicians Foundation. The volume now "is really coming back," he said. But, depending on the future course of the pandemic, Dr. Lisa Bielamowicz, a co-founder of Gist Healthcare, a consulting firm, predicts "another wave of financial stress hitting practices." Many doctors' groups will seek a buyer, whether a hospital, an insurance company or a private equity firm that plans to roll up practices into a larger business. One doctor, who asked not to be identified because the discussions are confidential, said she and her partner had already been talking with the nearby hospital nearby about buying their pediatric practice before the pandemic arrived in the United States. Although federal aid has helped, patient visits are still 15% below normal, she said, and they are continually worried about making payroll and having enough doctors and staff to see patients. As the number of virus cases balloons in the Midwest, her employees must deal with increasingly agitated parents. "They're yelling and cussing at my staff," she said. Working for a telemedicine firm might be an alternative, she added. "It's a hard job to begin with, to own your own business," she said. The coronavirus crisis has amplified problems that doctors were already facing, whether they own their practice or are employed. "A lot of physicians were hanging on by a thread from burnout before the pandemic even started," said Dr. Susan R. Bailey, the president of the American Medical Association. In particular, smaller practices continue to have difficulty finding sufficient personal protective equipment, like gloves and masks. "The big hospitals and health care systems have pretty well-established systems of PPE," she said, but smaller outfits might not have a reliable source. "I was literally on eBay looking for masks." The cost of these supplies has also become a significant financial issue for some practices. Doctors are also stressed by the never-ending need to keep safe. "There is a hunker-down mentality now," Bailey said. She is concerned that some doctors will develop PTSD from the chronic stress of caring for patients during the pandemic. Even those who are not responsible for running their own practices are leaving. Courtney Barry, 40, a family nurse practitioner at a rural health clinic in Soledad, California, watched the cases of coronavirus finally ebb in her area, only to see wildfires break out. Many of her patients are farmworkers and work outside, and they became ill from the smoke. In 14 years as a nurse, Barry has never experienced anything "like this that is just such a high level of stress and just keeps going," she said, adding, "The other hard part is there's no end in sight." She tried working fewer days but decided eventually that she would stop altogether for several months beginning in early December. Barry hasn't figured out what's next for her. "My intention is to stay in medicine, although I would not be totally opposed to doing something in a totally different area, which is something that I would not have said in the past," she said. And patients have indeed felt the effects. The pandemic has developed into "a really huge disruption," said Hollister, the family physician, who thinks closed practices are likely to result in "a significant impairment to patients' access to medical care." In his community, where both specialists and primary care doctors are leaving, he is tending to more patients who no longer have a doctor. It is an issue that McGregory, who took a job at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health in Madison, worries about. There were some families in her practice whom she could not convince to find another pediatrician immediately. She said they "are waiting, which I discouraged, because I think every child should have a medical home." **MORE FROM LOCAL** Severed feet of four bald eagles, 25 MINUTES AGO other raptors found in Woodbury Federal authorities are offering a \$2,500 reward in hopes of finding whoever is responsible. Semi driver dies in Mankato hotel 57 MINUTES AGO crash The driver of a semi has died after his rig left a highway and crashed into a hotel in Mankato. 6:15AM Prisons have highest single-day spike in coronavirus cases Wisconsin prisons have experienced the highest single-day spike in coronavirus cases since the pandemic began. North Shore's balancing act: How to 'stay safe and stay open' 5:59AM With COVID-19 cases continuing to rise, northeastern Minnesota officials are grappling with how to promote public health without hurting the local businesses in desperate need of tourism traffic. Semi driver crashes into Mankato 5:53AM hotel, dies The truck went down an embankment and struck the River Hills Hotel. StarTribune Follow Us On: More of what matters to Minnesota. All day. 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