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Doctors push for medical liability reform

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By Leland Kim - bio | email

HONOLULU (KHNL) - Hawaii's health care crisis continues to stretch our limited medical resources. At least a hundred doctors have left Hawaii since 2007, according to the Hawaii Medical Association. But there may be hope this legislative session. Two doctors - one from Hawaii, the other from Mississippi -- may help change the way Hawaii practices medicine.

Dr. Linda Rasmussen's busy work load has gotten busier. She is one of four windward Oahu orthopedic surgeons. There should be seven for that side of the island.

"And now you add more people leaving and now it increases burden to the point that you're trying to remember to return phone calls," said Dr. Rasmussen.

Since Dr. John Bellatti, an orthopedic surgeon from Kona, and Dr. Doug Hiller, a Waimea orthopedic surgeon, left the Big Island late last year, Dr. Rasmussen has seen an increased number of patients from neighbor islands.



Dr. Connie McCaa



Dr. Linda Rasmussen



"We're so isolated in Hawaii that having adequate care is really important," she said. "It's not like you can drive to the next state over and get your CT scan or an MRI or see a specialist. We don't have that option."

She blames the high cost of malpractice insurance and low reimbursement rates as the major factors in driving doctors away from Hawaii. She thinks medical liability -- or tort -- reform is the answer.

"Medical tort reform is an option that does not increase taxes," said Dr. Rasmussen.

Dr. Connie McCaa agrees. She helped convince lawmakers in Mississippi to pass a tort reform law in 2003. She says it's made a dramatic difference.

"The number of lawsuits have gone from 2,500, down to 196 last year," said Dr. McCaa, an ophthalmologist who practices in Flowood, Mississippi.

She's here to share her experience with tort reform.

"What message do you want to send Hawaii lawmakers tomorrow?" asked KHNL.

"I want them to realize that if it continues the way it is they will get to the state Mississippi was in," said Dr. McCaa. "Where we could not get the care that was needed for the patients."

And she says, patients sharing their stories helped pass tort reform in her state, and that's what Hawaii doctors hope happens here.

Dr. McCaa will speak with Hawaii lawmakers and members of "Save Our Doctors" Thursday afternoon about tort reform.