



# UNREALIZED POTENTIAL: CHALLENGES FACED BY IMMIGRANT HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONALS IN BC

**Immigrant Women's Advisory Committee (IWAC 3)  
Pacific Immigrant Resources Society (PIRS)  
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50-30 Challenge  
Ecosystem Partner  
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# INTRODUCTION

Canada is facing a healthcare crisis, primarily due to the shortage of healthcare professionals. According to a report from 2023 House of Commons Standing Committee on Health, one of the main reasons behind Canada's current healthcare crisis is the shortage of healthcare professionals.\* An estimated one in five — nearly a million — British Columbians do not have a family doctor, and that's just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the healthcare crisis in British Columbia. Emergency rooms in rural communities have been forced to close. Wait times for emergency and specialized care continue to climb, and a lack of paramedics has had severe, sometimes fatal consequences. And it's not only a shortage of family doctors; specialist doctors are also a scarce resource, to the point that the waiting list to see a specialist in cardiology, orthopedics, traumatology, allergies, and pediatric dermatology, among others, can be up to a year long.

We know that Canada is also a country of immigrants. Almost one in four people who call Canada home are or have been immigrants or permanent residents. (1) According to the 2021 census data, 8.3 million people, or 23% of the population, fall into this category. Statistics Canada reported that recent immigrants are on an average younger than the rest of the Canadian population and have been crucial in filling much-needed jobs in the Canadian labor market. However, there are no exact numbers on how many of these migrants are healthcare professionals who have not been allowed to work in their field.

Knowing this, it is almost impossible to understand how doctors, dentists, nurses, among others, are currently working as office medical assistants, dishwashers, drivers, or in any other job that, while dignified, does not make use of their skills and knowledge, as well as their experience as professionals.

\*House of Commons Standing Committee on Health. (2023). Addressing Canada's Health Workforce Crisis. Retrieved from [https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection\\_2023/parl/x62-1/XC62-1-1-441-10-eng.pdf](https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2023/parl/x62-1/XC62-1-1-441-10-eng.pdf)

# SURVEY RESULTS

While attending the IWAC program at PIRS, we conducted a survey with the aim of finding and understanding the obstacles immigrant healthcare professionals are facing in order to practice their profession in this beautiful and resourceful country that needs more healthcare professionals, especially in British Columbia. In two weeks after publishing the survey, we received 54 responses, 85% of which were from women. The majority were between 36 and 45 years old, were legally allowed to work in BC, and had been in BC for 1-3 years. Many of them had over 10 years of experience in their home countries, and 88.9% intended to pursue practicing their profession again. Only 50% were working in a healthcare-related job, but not in their original field of expertise.

Ranking of demographic variables among survey respondents (n=54):

Age Group	Gender	Country of Origin	Duration of Stay in BC	Status in Canada
The majority were between <b>36 - 45</b> , followed by 26 - 36, 46 - 55, 56+	The majority were <b>females</b> ; 14.8% identified as males	The majority were from the <b>Philippines</b> , followed by Mexico, Colombia, Iran, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Nepal, Egypt, Sri Lanka, Ukraine	The majority were between <b>1 - 3 years</b> , followed by 4 - 6 years, 7 - 10 years, Over-10 years	The majority were on <b>Open Work Permits</b> , followed by permanent residents (PR), maintained status waiting for PR and Student Visa

Key findings from the survey (n=54) about obstacles immigrant healthcare professionals faced in practicing their professions in BC (Sep - Oct 2024):

**Over-10 years of medical professional experience in home countries**

**51.9% pursued leadership roles**

**88.9% attempted or intended practicing in respective health professions in BC**

**48.1% were working in the healthcare sector in BC, but not in original professions**

# SURVEY RESULTS

We asked the participants what challenges they faced and the most common one, reported by 85% of respondents, was the lack of credential recognition. This includes the long time required to be licensed to practice finally in BC and the high costs associated with the process, which involve document translation, source verification, exams, college memberships, and recognition, among other expenses.

Ranking of the survey participants' professional roles in their country of origin:

Professional Role	Ranking
Nurse	1
Physician (General Practitioner)	2
Physician (Specialist)	3
Pharmacist	4
Dentist	5
Physiotherapist	6
Medical Laboratory Technician	7
Radiologist	8
Midwife	9
Paramedic	10
Surgeon	11
Occupational Therapist	12
Psychologist	13

Additionally, 77.8% did not receive any support or guidance, and 57.4% reported limited networking opportunities. Other challenges identified include unfamiliarity with the Canadian healthcare system (46%), lack of mentorship (46%), and systemic discrimination (31%). One participant wrote,

*Back home, I was a practicing surgeon with over a decade of experience. When I moved to Canada, I realized that getting my credentials recognized would take years and significant financial resources. To support my family, I took a job as a cashier. It's been difficult to see my skills go unused, and while customers are often curious about my background, explaining my situation can sometimes feel discouraging... explaining that I was once a surgeon.*

When asked about additional support or resources that could help bridge the gap for immigrant healthcare workers in BC, the most important needs identified were reducing the time required for credential recognition and lowering the costs involved. In second place, respondents indicated the need for mentorship throughout this journey.



# CONCLUDING REMARKS

The lengthy time required for credentialing leads professionals to a crossroads where it becomes increasingly expensive and exhausting to achieve the goal of practicing. Immigrant health professionals are asked to provide three continuous years of experience in their country of origin and no more than three years of not practicing. However, it often takes more than three years to process and wait for recognition. Thus when the professional experience is finally recognized on paper, the experience is no longer accepted, and they are sent back to their country of origin to work again in order to regain their experience. Additionally, regarding English language recognition, the English exam must be renewed every two years, even though the highest level is required from the outset to be accredited. This results in both emotional and financial exhaustion, as well as a waste of time and human resources.

Finally, from our experience as an immigrant researcher and healthcare professional, and knowing many other immigrant women with young children, we can't help but think about how childcare responsibilities often create extra barriers for women, especially immigrant healthcare workers. It's clear to me that without universal child care in BC and across Canada, we can't achieve real equity—how can we expect women to fully pursue their careers and credentials when they're carrying so much of the childcare burden? Currently, there are several associations that support healthcare professionals, and we hope that together, associations and community members, we can make our voices heard so that both immigration authorities and professional associations can find a way to make better use of the human resources that Canada is wasting and so desperately needs.

Lastly, we have shared in the next page a list of resources that we are currently aware of with the hope that it can be of support. We also hope that, over time, this list will grow, as will the number of doctors and other healthcare professionals working in their field in BC.

# RESOURCE LIST

- ▶ **Internationally Educated Health Professionals (IEHP) Initiative:** Offers information, support, and funding to help internationally trained healthcare professionals navigate the credential recognition process and integrate into the Canadian healthcare system
- ▶ **Health Match BC:** A free recruitment service that helps healthcare professionals connect with opportunities in British Columbia, including guidance on licensing and registration processes.
- ▶ **Immigrant Employment Council of BC (IEC-BC):** Provides mentorship and networking opportunities to help internationally trained professionals, including healthcare workers, integrate into BC's labor market.
- ▶ **British Columbia College of Nurses and Midwives (BCCNM):** The regulatory body for nurses and midwives in BC provides resources, guidance, and assessments for internationally educated nurses and midwives seeking licensure.
- ▶ **Medical Council of Canada (MCC):** Supports internationally trained doctors with credential verification and preparation for medical licensing exams in Canada.
- ▶ **Practice Ready Assessment - British Columbia (PRA-BC):** Provides a pathway for internationally trained family physicians to demonstrate their readiness to practice in BC through supervised clinical assessments.
- ▶ **S.U.C.C.E.S.S.:** A multi-service organization supporting immigrants in BC with career services, networking, and credential recognition assistance, including programs tailored to healthcare workers.
- ▶ **Canadian Network of Agencies for Regulation (CNAR):** Provides resources and information on regulatory requirements across Canada, helping professionals understand the steps needed for credential recognition.
- ▶ **AIMGA – Helping IMGs Across Canada:** A non-profit organization dedicated to supporting International Medical Graduates (IMGs) across Canada in their integration into the Canadian healthcare system.
- ▶ **Progressive Intercultural Community Services (PICS) Society:** A non-profit organization based in British Columbia that provides services and programs to support immigrants, newcomers, and underserved communities.

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*If anyone is interested in sharing additional resources or has questions, we'd love to hear from you! Feel free to reach out to the writers Elaine Unarce at [leiagraceelaine@gmail.com](mailto:leiagraceelaine@gmail.com) and Paulina Rodriguez at [plrh.rhcyps@gmail.com](mailto:plrh.rhcyps@gmail.com). Let's keep this important conversation going!*