Heart disease remains the number-one killer in the United States. There is no shortage of patients needing cardiologists—and yet there aren’t enough doctors to go around.

According to a new report released by the American College of Cardiology (ACC), the number of practicing cardiologists will need to double between 2000 and 2050 to accommodate aging baby boomers, and a growing population of heart disease patients.

“We have a significant shortage of 3,000 cardiologists in the workplace today, and all indicators are that it’s going to get worse if we don’t do something,” said George P. Rodgers, M.D., F.A.C.C., chair of the ACC Board of Trustees Workforce Task Force.

The ongoing obesity epidemic and new treatments, which allow patients to live longer with heart disease, are increasing the demand for cardiologists. At the same time, more than 40 percent of cardiologists in the current workforce are over the age of 55, and nearing retirement.

Training opportunities for cardiologists are limited—in the 1990s, policymakers wrongly assumed that family practitioners would treat heart disease, resulting in a 25 percent cut in the number of cardiologist training spots. While other medical fields have a growing number of women and minorities, they remain underrepresented in cardiology. African Americans and Hispanics form only 6 percent of all cardiologists, women only 12 percent.

In its report, the ACC recommends solutions, including expanding the number of fellowship positions, reducing known factors that may encourage early retirement and creating incentives for underrepresented minorities to consider cardiology, as well as encouraging a team-based approach to cardiology care that leverages the skills and expertise of nurse practitioners and physician assistants.

“We need to advocate for more training spots and funding for cardiovascular specialists and, in the meantime, find creative and more effective ways of delivering care,” said Alfred A. Bove, M.D., F.A.C.C., president of the ACC. “Team-based care is a major opportunity for improving the current and future workforce crisis.”

For more information, visit www.acc.org.