

## South Korea's Battle Against Doctor Shortages

In Seoul, a significant rift between the government and the medical community unfolds as thousands of junior doctors, supported by the Korean Medical Association (KMA), strike against a government proposal to increase medical school admissions. This protest, which began on 20 Feb 2024, has seen approximately 9,000 resident and intern doctors—about 70% of the nation's trainee medical workforce—abandon their posts.

- **Demographic Shifts and Policy Responses:** South Korea faces a demographic challenge, with the population of individuals aged 65 or older expected to exceed 10 million in 2024, ushering in a super-aged society. To address the healthcare demands of an aging population, the government plans to increase medical student admissions starting in 2025. However, the country struggles with a low doctor-to-population ratio of 2.6 per 1,000 people, one of the lowest among developed economies, exacerbating the healthcare crisis.
- **Impact of the Strike on Healthcare Services:** The mass walkout has fueled a crisis in medical services nationwide, leading to the cancellation of surgeries and treatments and straining emergency healthcare services. The government's ultimatum for trainee physicians to return to work by the end of February has been unheeded, prompting threats to suspend the medical licenses of some 7,000 trainee doctors.
- **The Deepening Rift and Public Opinion:** The prolonged strike and the government's unwavering stance on implementing its plan despite its impact on hospital operations and patient care indicate a worsening situation. Critics argue that the government has failed to adequately consult with the medical community, further inflaming tensions ahead of the parliamentary elections in Apr 2024. Despite public favor towards the initiative, with about 76% support according to a recent Gallup Korea poll, the medical community remains steadfast in its opposition.

The standoff in South Korea's healthcare sector is more than a dispute over policy; it's a reflection of the broader challenges facing an aging society and the need for sustainable solutions in healthcare provisioning. Protests of this magnitude hold the potential to disrupt daily life and the entirety of a nation's medical care services.