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DOCTORS UNMOVED BY INSURANCE BLOWOUT

FEARS that a substantial increase in medical insurance premiums three years ago would prompt thousands of doctors and specialists to resign have proved unfounded.

A government report released yesterday reveals Australia has more doctors and medical specialists than ever, but they are working fewer hours.

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report shows the number of doctors increased by 10per cent from 51,106 to 56,207 between 2000 and 2003, but the hours they worked fell from 45.5 hours to 44.4 hours.

"We were looking at the impact of **medical indemnity** and found that despite concerns at the time, it did not lead to a drop in the number of medical practitioners," said Glenice Taylor, head of the labour force and rural health unit at the institute.

Insurance company United Medical Protection collapsed in April 2002, leaving more than 30,000 medical specialists without cover, forcing a massive jump in premiums.

In October 2002, the federal Government announced a financial assistance package to help some specialists pay their insurance premiums. Fields such as emergency medicine, surgery and obstetrics were thought to be most likely to lose specialists.

However, according to the report, the number of emergency medicine specialists increased 38per cent between 2000 and 2003. There were 17per cent more obstetricians and gynecologists in 2003 and the number of surgery specialists rose 9per cent.

"The increase in premiums didn't have much of an effect but maybe that's because it was resolved in time," Ms Taylor said.

The report, Medical Labour Force 2003, shows medical practitioners in all states were working slightly shorter hours.

Several factors contributed to the reduction in work hours, Ms Taylor said.

"The workforce is getting older, and older workers nearing retirement are reducing their hours," she said.

"There are also a greater proportion of females than ever before, and in most professions females tend to work shorter hours than males.

"I also suspect lifestyle factors may have played a role, because we found doctors in every age group, and both sexes, were reducing their hours."