



President's message. Are we disappearing?

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Recently I was asked what the SRPC plans to do about the fact that the rural population in Canada is decreasing. How can we adequately plan for physician supply and rural education when rural communities are disappearing? An urban anesthesiologist suggested we forget about training GP anesthesiologists for rural practice. After all, everyone knows that in a decade the rural communities will be deserted, since all of us will have seen the light and moved to the city.

I found these comments interesting at a time when there is significant energy and passion to deal with rural issues in many jurisdictions across Canada.

The SRPC had its Fall council meeting in Winnipeg, and the work being done by our committees is impressive. Some provinces have made great strides in promoting rural education initiatives and in developing programs to recruit and retain rural physicians. The SRPC project to make an inventory of successful rural recruiting programs is ongoing. Educational programs such as the Northern Ontario School of Medicine, the Northern Medical Program in BC, and distributed learning models for medical students provide opportunities for positive change in the number of physicians choosing rural practice. The Interprofessional Rural Program in BC sends teams of health professional students to rural areas and has supported rural primary care initiatives. In some areas rural has so successfully claimed attention that urban areas are concerned their vulnerable populations are being ignored.

Is the Canadian demographic changing radically? Well, it is certainly true that the urban population is growing. Eventually this results in a decreasing percentage of Canadians living in rural

communities. However, many rural communities have quite stable populations, some of them have stable medical services, and many of them have developed innovative solutions to health care delivery that could serve as models to the rest of Canada — if anybody cared to examine them.

The biggest threat to the existence of rural communities is lack of support for rural infrastructure. Despite providing the raw materials that drive provincial economies, small rural populations need help from larger jurisdictions to maintain roads, clean water and hospitals. If there is no recognition, on the part of urban dwellers, of the importance of having rural communities (except when they want to fish or ski there) then as the percentage of Canadians living in rural areas decreases we will continue to fall victim to urban-centric planning.

Nowhere is this process more evident than in the regionalization of health services. The entire concept of the basket of services we provide is foreign to the urban planners. Small utilization numbers become an excuse to eliminate services, and this is happening across Canada.

The solution to preserving rural services is education. We need education for rural physicians, communities and other medical organizations. Most challenging is the need to educate bureaucrats and politicians.

This is the challenge for the SRPC. We must keep rural issues on the agenda of governments and other organizations. We must continue to develop policy statements that can be used to support rural health and lobby for support for rural infrastructure.

Political change is slow, but rural Canada is not disappearing.