

How did I end up in rural medicine?

*Roderick Cheung, MD
Rural Hanover Site Chief
Resident, Department
of Family Medicine,
University of Western
Ontario, London, Ont.
Chair, Resident Committee,
Society of Rural Physicians
of Canada, Shawville, Que.*

*Correspondence to:
Dr. Roderick Cheung,
Hanover Medical Associates,
118 7th Ave., Hanover ON
N4N 2G9; rcheun22@uwo.ca*

I have been told by quite a few people that I am not the typical rural resident. I was not born nor did I grow up in a rural area. As Hong Kong was my birthplace and I was raised in the Greater Toronto Area, I had no ties with rural Canada. I also did all of my undergraduate medical training at one of the most urban academic centres in Canada, the University of Toronto. So how did I end up in rural medicine?

It turns out I was able to get an opportunity to experience what rural medicine is early in my medical training. I remember how we had 14 weeks off in the summers of the preclerkship years. Being a keen medical student, I was working hard to fill the weeks up with activities that would prepare me to become a competent physician later on. I managed to get a grant to do 12 weeks of research at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre in Toronto. But I had 2 weeks left. I thought that 1 week off would be enough. So what could I do with the extra week?

Around that time, I had received an email about the chance to participate in Rural Medicine Week in Orangeville, organized by the Rural Ontario Medical Program (ROMP). I immediately signed up. This gave me an opportunity to see how rewarding rural family medicine is. I really liked the variety of practice opportunities available. Your practice can involve shifts in the emergency department, doing obstetrics, giving anesthesia in the operating room, nursing home visits, having a family practice in the office and admitting your own patients into the hospital. I then realized

that I did not have to become a subspecialist. You can have an interesting and challenging career being a rural generalist. This triggered my interest in rural medicine. I started going to Google Maps and learning about the different rural areas in Canada. I was able to organize further rural electives with ROMP. I also started getting involved with the student committee of the Society of Rural Physicians of Canada (SRPC). With funding provided by ROMP, I was able to participate in Annual Rural and Remote Medicine Courses organized by the SRPC.

There has been much talk about how the way to produce more rural physicians is by accepting more students from rural areas. I think it is equally important to implement early exposure of rural medicine into undergraduate medical programs. Otherwise, there will not be enough time for medical students to explore this field through their undergraduate medical training. One great example of mandatory early exposure to rural medicine is Discovery Week, a program organized by the Southwestern Ontario Medical Education Network. This involves a 1-week placement in rural clinical settings at the end of first year for all undergraduate medical students at the Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry at the University of Western Ontario. I hope that similar programs can be established in all of the other Canadian medical schools. Because without them, I would not have become a rural resident.

Competing interests: None declared.