

Rural electives: a clinical and community experience

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Within hours of arriving in Hinton, I was scrubbed in and assisting on a cholecystectomy while my 3 medical school classmates were off to the family clinics and the emergency department. We were part of a pilot project at the University of Alberta that sent 13 students to 3 rural communities: Hinton, Peace River and Grand Prairie. The program's goal was to introduce students to rural medicine and to provide clinical experience.

During our 4 weeks in Hinton, we spent time learning in surgery, radiology, endoscopy, emergency, obstetrics and family medicine. It was so exciting to practise doing stitches, taking blood pressure readings and taking patient histories, and rewarding to help diagnose bowel obstructions, which we had just learned about in lecture. The hospital and clinic staff were amazing to work with, and the patients were very accommodating and encouraging. I was impressed by the hospitality that the entire community offered the 4 of us while we were in Hinton. The grocery clerk recognized us from the article in the local newspaper and asked us each time how our learning experience was going and what we thought of her hometown. Rather than staying in hotels, we were able to stay in the homes of community members who graciously hosted us during our 4-week stay. We were included in community events and became familiar with the community members, businesses and facilities.

We made plans to speak at the local secondary schools to students who may be interested in health care. The 4 of us had been raised in small communities across Canada, and we wanted to help

these students learn how to overcome any barriers that they may perceive about attaining higher education. We hope they now believe rural students are able to accomplish their dreams and be successful in medicine.

Although our time spent in Hinton was brief, the involvement in our educational experience by the local physicians, community members and other learners in Hinton was greatly appreciated. This experience highlighted that weekend electives are important but cannot provide the same type of experience that we were able to have while living in a rural community for an entire month. Rural placements, whether clinical or preclinical, are an extremely important initiative and imperative to reducing the shortage of rural physicians. The knowledge gained from rural family physicians can include how to manage a practice, work with fewer resources, organize patient travel to the city and the many other aspects that make rural medicine and life so exciting.

It is hard to imagine how someone could be involved in a similar experience and not be influenced to consider practising medicine in a rural area, but perhaps I am biased by my rural background. To ensure that a rural elective is a positive experience, students should be welcomed and integrated into the community during their brief introduction to rural medicine. Belonging to a community and identifying as a contributing member of that community is a powerful motivator to return to a similar environment in the future.

Abridged version of the winning entry for the SRPC Student Essay Contest.

Competing interests: None declared.