

A bit of history

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Recently, at the Rural and Remote Medicine conference, a chance remark by a colleague led me to think it was time to write about how some of the elements of the SRPC came about. For example, RuralMed, the SRPC listserv that lets rural doctors from around the world discuss issues of relevance to them, wasn't always an institution. So I asked Dr. John Wootton, SRPC president and RuralMed's founder, about how this wonderful listserv, which now links more than 800 rural doctors in 12 countries, began.

John recounted,

I was taking a break from the 1995 Rural and Remote Medicine conference being held in Montréal by the SRPC. I hiked up to the McGill Computer Store, hoping to look at the first Macintosh PowerBook (with a new associate professor card in my pocket, in case I wanted to buy something) and noticed on a corkboard an advertisement about an engineering faculty listserv.

John hadn't heard about listservs before. He read the advertisement's description of a method to join disparate individuals together, using a central server that would send emails to an entire list of subscribers. As the SRPC member-at-large for communications, John quickly realized that this was a tool rural doctors could use:

I phoned the McGill computer department that was in charge of hosting the listservs, and set one up. The name RuralMed came off the top of

my head. I walked back to the hotel and announced the listserv at the Annual General Meeting [of the SRPC], and that was it.

The RuralMed listserv had its first message on Mother's Day on May 11, 1995, at 8:29 pm. There were just 35 members on the list.

In subsequent years there were other listservs for rural physicians. A notable one, from The College of Family Physicians of Canada, was the Canadian Rural Medicine Network (CaRMeN), their listserv for rural doctors that made its debut in late 1996. Many joined that list as well, but it petered out because ... well ... it did not have as much appeal as RuralMed.

The fact that RuralMed continues on is not so much a tribute to the technology or the SRPC as it is to its membership. After all, it's the subscribers who provide the content. And where else will you find discussions about tractor repairs (and brag pictures of tractors — although we try to discourage attachments because some rural doctors are still on dial-up), how to deal with impaired drivers, moral reasons for breaching patient confidentiality, and the health effects of nuclear reactors and washing machines?

About the washing machine connection, well, don't ask me. You can ask RuralMed. To subscribe, send a message to admin@srpc.ca. Include your name and the words "Subscribe RuralMed" as the subject message.