

The rural remote doctor

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You have only to go to the next town to find out that it is different. Rural areas and rural medicine are highly heterogeneous. The rural “close” doctor works in a “necklace” community around a larger metropolitan area. The remote regional doctor works in a larger hub community, usually with a hospital and sometimes a complement of specialists who can support surrounding communities and other, smaller hospitals. The rural distant doctor works at a hospital in a small town without any specialist support. Today, I reflect on the rural remote doctor, who often works alone and with the least amount of support.

There you are, say, on the island of Campobello, in New Brunswick, but with (currently) not even ferry service to the rest of the province. There is a nursing home, a pharmacy, a grocery store, a consolidated school and a Royal Canadian Mounted Police detachment. The population of 1000 people cannot support more than 1 physician, so don’t expect a hospital. You are it.

Acuity and volumes are low, to be sure, but that doesn’t mean that runny

noses and blood pressure pills are the limit of your practice. A doctor here could be asked to deal with the premature delivery of a famous resident (as it happens, one of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s children was born on Campobello, in just such circumstances) or to sew up the injuries of a common fisherman.

Theoretically, you could say no, and, if you don’t have radiography, setting a fracture may be an unreasonable expectation. However, the policeman knows where you live (so do all the other locals, for that matter). You have a moral and social obligation to do your best when called on. After all, you are the doctor, and even if you have nothing, you are the most qualified on those occasions when the community has life-or-limb situations.

To be that doctor, to take that calling, to help the community cope and thrive, even when you are surely beyond your comfort level, if not your competence, that takes strength of character. I salute you.

There are many hundreds of this kind of rural doctor in our land. You know who you are. I salute you, as you are among the best of us.