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Northern exposure: reflections on a transformative family medicine rotation in Rural Ontario

Exposition au Nord : réflexions sur une rotation transformatrice en médecine familiale dans l'Ontario rural

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As third year medical students at the University of Ottawa, we had the opportunity to complete our family medicine core rotation in Moose Factory, a community of approximately 2,500 people located off the coast of James Bay in Northern Ontario. This was one of the most rewarding, fun, and challenging experiences we've had throughout our medical training, and has fostered skills that have helped us grow both as future physicians and as individuals. We hope to highlight why we believe every medical student should have the opportunity to complete a rural, remote elective.

When compared to a typical clinic-based family medicine rotation, rural and remote rotations offer a broader range of responsibilities that step outside of the traditional family physician role. In Moose Factory, there are very few specialists. It was common for us to work outside of the family medicine clinic: this included the emergency department, operating room, inpatient ward, physiotherapy suite, and the specialized addictions clinic. These are opportunities that would seldom be found in an academic center. Being integrated into so many different aspects of care, we recognized that it was not uncommon for one provider to see the patient in the emergency department, admit them to the hospital, round on them daily, discharge them, and follow up with them in the clinic. This took the meaning of continuity of care to a much higher level, which was very rewarding.

Additionally, we were able to learn many procedural skills such as intubation, suturing, casting, nerve blocks, and point-of-care ultrasound.

Working in a resource-limited environment can also be advantageous in developing problem-solving skills. We had to sharpen our clinical reasoning skills as there was limited access to diagnostic tests, forcing us to rely heavily on patient's history and physical exam to make decisions. Moose Factory is a community that often requires patient transfer via helicopter or plane. This meant that transfer could be delayed by weather conditions, which often gave rise to its own set of challenges. It was necessary to explore alternative treatment options or stabilize the patient for long periods of time. This developed our "think outside the box" mentality which will translate well to any medical profession.

We also had the privilege of learning more about the history of the reservation and the wonderful people who call it home. Many locals were kind enough to invite us to join them for unforgettable activities such as dogsledding and eating bannock. Local staff took us on hikes around the island and advised us on how to catch a glimpse of the northern lights. We are also grateful for the numerous physicians that created a supportive learning environment, which was crucial for our development.

Overall, rural rotations provide an unmatched opportunity to gain experience and refine skills that would be difficult to acquire in a traditional academic setting, as did our own rural experience. We highly recommend that every medical student complete a rural rotation during their training to improve their skills and create lasting memories!

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