

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Final thoughts from your immediate past president

A year ago, I sat before you, here in our first virtual AGM. I think we were all hoping that a year later the pandemic would be under control. Case numbers at the time, were on the rise and we would soon be into the second wave. We now are all treading water in wave four.

There has been a lot that has happened this year. Honestly, more than ever imagined when I started out. A year ago, when my family stood behind me and put the chain of office on my shoulders it was surprisingly heavy. I have felt the weight of it throughout much of the year. But, as heavy as it felt at times, I was strengthened by so many of you – colleagues, the other officers, the board, many of you here tonight, and of course the AMA staff, senior staff and Mike Gormley. Importantly, I was also supported so much by my wife, children and other family and friends. Thank you all, I could not have done it without you.

Last year, in my installation speech, I quoted Osler - “The practice of medicine is an art, not a trade; a calling ... a calling in which your heart will be exercised equally with your head.” I used this quote to frame the dedication you all have to your patients and practice. I have also witnessed this same dedication in the staff here at the AMA, to you, the member. This year has been a difficult one for the association but what I have seen time and time again is everyone going above and beyond. Long hours, late nights, weekends while under a lot of uncertainty. I want to acknowledge this and provide my deepest thanks.

I also want to thank all of you for doing what you do for your patients, the public and each other. “Long hours, late nights, weekends while under a lot of uncertainty” the phrase I just mentioned of course applies to all of you. I fully realize - the dedication to the profession that Osler’s alludes to in his quote, does come at a price. Having heard from many of you, this last year has been particularly taxing.

As we have been trying to move through a challenging relationship with government and the crisis of this fourth wave, I soul searched to try and find something inspirational to say. Sayings like - “we are all this together”, “we got this” and the so called “pandemic pivot” that were mantras a year ago, today seem somehow ill placed – even though in many ways they apply more than ever. Instead, I thought I would share a story.

I grew up in Northern Ontario, the son of a rural family physician. Nearly every summer we spent time canoeing on the rivers that were once used as the means of travel and trade. I remember one year when my father had been particularly busy – understaffed in town leading to long hours spent in his practice, the ER and delivering babies. He told me that while he was really looking forward to the trip – he had no time to organize it and asked me if I would be willing. This was no small task as we were to spend two weeks on the Missinaibi River destined for Moosonee, which is situated in on the southern tip of James Bay. The name Missinaibi means “pictured waters” in Cree, and it is one of the longest free-flowing and undeveloped rivers in Ontario – truly remote wilderness. I was only a teenager but did take on the task, mapped out the length of our days and all the

supplies we would need to make it there. There was also the train trip back on the Polar Bear Express to organize.

My mom kept telling me how tired he was, and how much this trip meant to him. I could see that too. When we started the trip and he was unusually quiet – as French Canadians we often sang the old songs of the voyagers. I could tell he was in a rough spot. Along with the responsibility I was given as trip organizer I was also given the position in the stern of the boat. It became my job to steer us through the rapids.

The water was very high and fast that year making for a very different river than when we previously travelled upon it. The first rapid we encountered was one that should not have been run in an open boat – a solid Class III, for those of you that know rivers. Standing waves about three feet high – but so much water that there were no rocks to be seen – so I sent us right down the middle. I remember the first wave hitting my dad face on – he then stopped paddling and rested his paddle cross ways on the gunnels. This wave was the first of many.

Sitting at the back of boat really gave me a beautiful visual. With each wave I could see his shoulders, that started very high and tense, slowly relax and his head slowly start to bend forward. Once we were through, bailed out the boat and after a few choice words about my navigational choices, we were on our way. Slowly the voyageur songs began.

Over the years I have also known moments like these in my own life – and in this last year especially. They are most often not experiences on epic adventures such as this one, but small things that surround me every day that remind me of what is truly important. I urge you to seek out these moments and let them wash over you. As hard as things get, this is what grounds us and keeps us going.

I have also come to know that the only thing better than these moments is being able to provide them to someone else. There is an Irish proverb that states, “In the shelter of each other the people live”. I realize that extending ourselves to others is challenging when we are facing our own struggles, but I would remind you that sometimes it is the smallest of gestures that provides this shelter to others, and in turn shelters us.

I thank you all for your attention and your indulgence. I want to extend a thank you to Dr. Christine Molnar for her service and friendship as I move into her role as immediate past president. And also, a heartfelt congratulations to Dr. Michelle Warren who will very soon become president – “You got this” Michelle and I am looking forward to supporting you in the role as Chris did me.

Once again, a most sincere thank you to Mike Gormley and all the AMA staff. When significant events come to an end in one’s life they are often met with mixed emotions: relief in being done and the challenging emotions of leaving the position while so much is happening. I’m sure this has been the experience of the previous 114 presidents of the AMA. However, there is no doubt, if you asked any one of them, they would all agree that the most rewarding part of their term was interacting with you – the physicians of Alberta.

- Dr. Paul Boucher

Alberta Medical Association, Immediate Past President