

# Alberta Doctors' Digest

## A voice for those who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds

I grew up surrounded by apple orchards and farms in a small community of approximately 1,500. My childhood is filled with memories of visiting my grandmother's dairy farm, climbing hay bales and forever searching for the next litter of stray kittens.

My brother Matthew and I spent winters sliding down the local hill and visiting my great uncle's sugar farm for the sweet treat that is candy on the snow. My brother continues to carry the family torch by working in the dairy farming industry. Despite my mom joking that "Dr. Edmondson" has a nice ring to it, she never imagined that I would make that name my reality.

We learn so much through observation as children, as adults and as medical learners. I was raised by two incredibly hard-working parents, worlds away from the realities of a medical career. As such, there are many givens that I am sure I still do not know. The seemingly universal unwritten rules, the importance of networking, titles and names. I quickly realized during medical school that there is a lot of non-medical knowledge I was expected to either know by default or be able to learn without asking too many pointed questions. The learning curve of medicine existed outside of the classroom as much as within it.



Dr. Alynne Edmondson

"The gap in socio-economic status between me and the majority of my peers was the most obvious, being surrounded by classmates who spoke of travelling the world from a young age and spending summers at the beach."

- Dr. Alynne Edmondson

Entering medicine from a non-medical family is its own journey that no one can necessarily prepare you for. I remember my first few years of school listening to others talk, thinking it sounded incredibly foreign. Not simply the medical jargon or acronyms I

did not yet know, but also the way people spoke and carried themselves. It was abundantly clear that I grew up in a world far from the one I had now entered.

The gap in socio-economic status between me and the majority of my peers was the most obvious, being surrounded by classmates who spoke of travelling the world from a young age and spending summers at the beach. Meanwhile, my summer memories revolve around the jobs I'd held since the age of 14. Eighty-hour work weeks at 19 years of age to pay tuition that fall. No ability to join in the banter about endless nights of fun around a campfire. It was challenging at times not to feel out of place.

Stepping into the Dalhousie Medicine New Brunswick building for the first time, I knew my life was about to change. The adjustment to the medical community is one I anticipated. The adjustment that came as I started to understand the lay of the land in medicine, however, is one that I did not see coming: the realization that I was now living in a different realm. I was learning to speak a new language, one that my friends and family didn't understand. The realization that I would never fit into my family the same way I used to was much more challenging to accept.

With time, I am learning to cherish being a leader in this realm, but there are still moments during every visit where I am reminded of how much I have changed. I am incredibly grateful to have a career dedicated to helping others. I cherish the moments I can be part of my patients' life stories, whether during a moment of triumph or as a support through difficult news. I feel fortunate to be able to stand alongside my patients knowing I have contributed to their health. Yet it is incredibly bittersweet to feel less understood than I once did by my own family and to know that this is my new reality.

I didn't grow up dreaming of becoming a doctor one day. In fact, for years I wanted to be a ballerina, despite never taking ballet classes or having a desire to. It wasn't until my third year at Saint Francis Xavier University that I truly decided that I wanted to pursue medicine. I had first considered law, then a career in biology, then transferred into a kinesiology program where I discovered my first academic loves: anatomy and physiology. From there, I looked into a career in physiotherapy, occupational and athletic therapy, along with a few others. I knew that I wanted to work with people and that I wanted to contribute to their well-being in some capacity.

I gradually gravitated more and more towards medicine. I knew it would not be an easy path, and it was not a road I wished to travel unless it was truly right for me. So rather than applying to medical school immediately out of university, I applied to a program called Somos Hermanos. It is a program based out of California geared towards individuals looking to enter health care in any capacity.

I was incredibly fortunate to be the first Canadian accepted into the program and consequently spent six months living in Guatemala. I learned about their history, culture, language and health care system. I was fortunate enough to spend time working with a gynecologist who ran a clinic for individuals participating in sex work, offering regular testing, counselling and supports. Working alongside a female physician who exemplified leadership through her work, which was viewed as controversial in the highly conservative area she lived in, was empowering.

Recognizing the impact of routine services on these patients was remarkable. They were able to come for health assessments and be treated without judgment when it was clear that they faced an incredible amount of mistreatment in their work. This experience was a privilege I will not forget and where my ambition to pursue medicine was truly fostered.

Equitable treatment and advocacy remain dear to my heart. From the experiences I speak of, as well as my hardships, there is an abundance of reasons that advocacy is dear to me. Throughout my medical training, I have lost a close family member, had urgent surgery, had a parent hospitalized in the cardiac care unit for 15 painful days, gone unmatched and started anew.

Learning to navigate the medical system through difficult times for myself and alongside others has taught me so much. All of the above is why I am currently serving as the PGY1-PGY2 Member at Large on the PARA Assembly. I love being an ally and an advocate for fellow residents and am proud to be a voice for those who come from a non-medical or lower socio-economic background.

For those reading this who are questioning their path, whether currently in medicine or not, you will get there. You can persevere through the difficult times, and you do not need to apologize for prioritizing your needs. Life is not always a straight path, nor are careers – and that is okay. A new direction is an opportunity for growth. Take the time you need to process, lean on your supports and then move forward with your head held high.

---

Banner image credit: pixabay.com