

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Dr. Bonnie R. Larson



Dr. Neil D.J. Cooper (L) and Dr. Bonnie R. Larson (R). (Photo credit: Curtis Comeau).

Dr. Bonnie Larson began not as a doctor, but as a cultural anthropologist; her master's thesis at the University of Calgary focused on the interactions among belief, meaning and healing for women living with chronic illness. She brings to her work as a physician a visceral understanding of the need to know her patients, those for whom she provides care, as whole people living in complex personal and psychosocial circumstances. Her patients need, and too rarely receive, such compassionate understanding.

Making the move from anthropology to medicine, she earned her MD from McMaster University, then went through the family medicine residency training program at the University of Calgary. She has sought out further training and service opportunities in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, India, Bolivia, Kenya and Peru, worked as a family physician with the Calgary Refugee Health Program serving newly arrived refugees, and worked extensively with Indigenous communities at the Elbow River Healing Lodge and Siksika First Nation Health Centre.

Dr. Larson works primarily with homeless Calgarians, and she works with them where they are – on the streets, in the alleys, by the river. She provides compassion and care to people who have been underserved or completely forgotten by the larger society in which they live. With the coming of the opioid crisis, her advocacy and her care have become even more passionate and more necessary. She is one of very few physicians anywhere in the world who is prescribing opioid replacements like Suboxone literally on the streets. She starts Suboxone with her patients as many times as it takes to give them a fighting chance to beat the addictions that are sabotaging their lives.

While still a resident, Dr. Larson created the impetus for the Global Health Enhanced Skills Residency Program in the Department of Family Medicine; since 2014, she has been its director. The time and energy she devotes to this program go far beyond anything covered by the small salary attached to the position, but she is responding to the increasing need to advocate for maintaining the mandate of experiential learning.

In 2014 Dr. Larson was one of the people who worked to set up Calgary's Allied Mobile Palliative Program (CAMPP), which works to improve end-of-life care for the vulnerably housed. She went on to found StreetCCRED (Street Community Capacity in Research, Education and Development), a community-based response to the suffering of Calgary's most vulnerable citizens.

StreetCCRED brings together community members, front-line service providers, academics, social programs, and agencies to fill in gaps in the current landscape of care for vulnerable people and populations. Its philosophy is shaped by the principles of health equity, collaboration, decolonization, compassion and harm reduction, and the addressing of issues of structural violence, upstream determinants of health, and housing. Her work in StreetCCRED has been tireless and completely voluntary, born of her deep compassion for the people she serves.