

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Here's your first door. Go find out what's behind it.

The Rural Integrated Community Clerkship at the University of Alberta is a core clerkship option for medical students. Third-year students are placed in an [Alberta rural community](#) for approximately 42 weeks, where they integrate their learning with rural life while making a difference in their communities.

Rural ICC students are assigned to family medicine practices where students are provided with learning experiences through continuous patient care under expert preceptor supervision. The continuity of care in the ICC program gives students several professional advantages. These include:

- Meaningful therapeutic relationships
- Experience handling undifferentiated problems
- Co-ordinating the care of individuals with chronic diseases
- Integrated assessment and management of the key illnesses seen in core disciplines of medicine

There are some important benefits for students who are accepted into this rural clerkship. For instance, students are finding that ICC is extremely good for their futures. Why is that? One important aspect is that ICC trains medical students to think holistically about the patient. Whether students intend to practice in a rural or urban setting, be a family doctor or specialize, the intense multi-faceted experience of rural medicine is unique.

Dr. Bradley Martin is a former ICC student and now a preceptor who practices in Hinton. He was drawn to practice medicine in rural Alberta in part because of his experience with ICC. "Whether or not you plan on being a rural family doc or emergency doc, the all-round skill set and independence we allow you to have is good for any specialty."

Also in Hinton, preceptor Dr. Erica Button stresses the benefits of real-life learning. "Right from the moment they get here, there is no classroom," she says. "They get right into the clinic, right into the labor and delivery ward, right into the emergency department. There is no break-in period. Here's your first door. Go find out what's behind it."

In essence, the real-life, holistic learning is helping to launch effective medical careers, and that's a theme often heard from students and preceptors. They say third year is vital to a future career in medicine, and students are learning everything they need in an intensive rural clerkship.

“Being responsible for an entire panel of patients is something I’ve never experienced before,” says Ting Wang, who did her clerkship in Hinton. “Being able to see patients and have close follow-up is definitely one of the huge advantages of being in ICC and having longitudinal experience like this.” She adds: “For me, one of the most rewarding experiences over 10 months is seeing a prenatal patient for her first check up and then following her pregnancy and maybe even delivering her baby. And then following up with her baby checkups.”

Not only is the learning very hands on, there is deep experience with preceptors who get to know the student and vice versa. In fact, the preceptors are extremely invested in the learning of each medical student. Preceptors become true mentors who work with the students over a considerable amount of time so that students can be well trained and improve.

“Our grads tell us that for years after ICC, they are still seeing the unfolding of how ICC has changed their learning because they had deep coaching, deep relationships, and they had a key role in the care of their patients,” says Dr. Darren Nichols, Clerkship Coordinator, ICC program at the U of A.

While ICC is certainly beneficial when considering an eventual rural medical career, what really stands out is that the comprehensive learning experience is spot on. “People say ICC is only if you want to go work rural, and I think that doesn’t make any sense,” says Glynn Martin who did his third-year clerkship in Whitecourt. “What ICC trains you to be is someone who thinks holistically about the patient and has all aspects of medicine on your mind at all times.”

Dr. Michael Caffaro, Assistant Registrar, College of Physicians & Surgeons of Alberta, is a former ICC preceptor. Historically, ICC students are the pick of the crop when it comes to residency opportunities, according to Dr. Caffaro. “These students come out as a very well-rounded group of medical residents. Disproportionate to the numbers in their medical class, they have gone on to become physician leaders in their communities and professions – and have extraordinary success with their ability to access residency and postgraduate training programs beyond what you would expect if they had stayed in an urban or academic center.”

The last word goes to Breanna McSweeney, who summed it up nicely on the last day of her clerkship in Ponoka. “The leap of faith is worth it because you get some awesome learning opportunities from ICC and the rural experience.”

Banner photo: Victoria Elliot, third year ICC student in Bonnyville. Photo credit: Marvin Polis