

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Award-winning physician is at home in rural Alberta

In May, Brooks family physician Dr. Erich van der Linde was recognized with a Rural Service Award by the [Society of Rural Physicians of Canada](#).

While he's honored by the award, Dr. van der Linde is much more comfortable in his role as a rural generalist, caring for the people of Brooks and area. In addition to the core of his work as a family physician, Dr. van der Linde is also a family practice anesthesiologist, a family practice obstetrician and delivers surgical procedures as part of his hospital-based work.

As community medical director for Brooks, Dr. van der Linde serves on a number of zone committees, including chair of the Recruitment Committee. In his work as the anesthesia representative for family doctors with the [Collaborative Advisory Group for General and Family Practice Anesthesia in Canada](#), Dr. van der Linde is a strong advocate for family practice anesthesia.

"This is a critical part of comprehensive rural family medicine," he explains. "Without this, you lose the ability to provide a lot of surgical procedures in the rural health care setting, forcing patients to travel to urban centres for relatively minor surgical procedures."

"It takes about 400 family physicians with extra training in anesthesia to service Canada's rural communities," he adds.



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Dr. van der Linde, Brooks

Dr. Erich van der Linde and family (photo credit: Rachel Boekel Photography)

“Leave a health care system better off than how you found it”

In addition to emphasizing the valuable role of family practice anesthesia in rural health care, in his over 10 years in Brooks, Dr. van der Linde has become an advocate for the provision of exemplary health care to rural Albertans.

“It’s important for rural Albertans ... rural Canadians ... to have a voice, to make people aware of the unique challenges we face in rural areas, providing excellent care close to home.”

“That’s what rural health care is about,” says Dr. van der Linde. “We’re part of the system! Patients don’t want to drive to big centres for health care services. We want to focus on providing more services rurally and improving the quality of those services.”

“It’s important to leave a health care system better off than how you found it,” says Dr. van der Linde.

Returning to roots

Asked what he would change about rural health care in Alberta, Dr. van der Linde says, “It hits close to home – the fact that after 19 years we haven’t recruited a Canadian-trained doctor to our town.”

It’s a concern and mandate close to his and his fellow rural physicians’ hearts, the majority of whom have come to practice in Canada from afar; many, in fact, from South Africa, Dr. van der Linde’s home country.

“We need to see doctors born and raised in rural Alberta train as physicians and return to their roots.” Sure, as Dr. van der Linde explains, physicians who are city-raised can become rural physicians, but when you’re from a rural area and you return there to live and work, and often be near family, you have a real connection to the community.”

“You know and love the rural lifestyle ... it’s in your blood,” he says. Referring to an impressive 75% return rate for people from rural areas, Dr. van der Linde says, “I’d like to see more people of rural origin attend university, train to become physicians and return to their home communities.”

“It’s frustrating that we struggle to train and retain Canadians for rural medicine. We need more positions allocated for people who come from rural areas.”

A land, and a community, of endless opportunities

“Medicine is a humbling career that can bring you to your knees,” says Dr. van der Linde. “I have a physician friend who said, ‘If you fall, make sure you fall on your knees.’ As rural physicians, we provide people with cradle-to-grave health care. We get to know them and care for them ... This job is rewarding, challenging and humbling,” he says. “I’m grateful for the endless opportunities.”

Dr. van der Linde and his family began to realize those opportunities as soon as they arrived in Brooks, warmly welcomed, in 2009. “Brooks is a wonderfully unique and

interesting town to practice medicine in,” he says, referring to the city’s vibrant multi-cultural society (population 14,000 plus).

“I visited three sites and chose Brooks because of the people and the quality of life that was available here,” Dr. van der Linde explains. Living lakeside, just outside Brooks, Dr. van der Linde and his family thrive on water sports in the summer and lake-surface hockey and other outdoor sports in the winter. Soon after arriving in Brooks, Dr. van der Linde’s in-laws joined him, his wife and their two sons.

“Coming to Canada has been the best decision of my life,” Dr. van der Linde affirms, both professionally and personally. “The safety and security this country provides for me and my family is incomparable.” On a recent trip back to Africa with his family, Dr. van der Linde was sitting on the beach with his son, Ben, who, after some thoughtful contemplation astutely observed: “Africa is nice, but there’s no ice here.” Yet another moment when Dr. van der Linde knew he made the right decision.

Everyone’s award

Grateful for the opportunity this award provides him – to reflect and advocate on behalf of rural health care in Alberta – Dr. van der Linde believes that “this reward should be given to each and every health care provider in rural Alberta: nurses, doctors, therapists ... We’re all in this together.” And in the end, says Dr. van der Linde, “The best recognition you can get is a thank you from a patient. That is the low-hanging fruit; the true joy of this profession.”

Banner photo credit: Marvin Polis