



# Reflections

## Reflecting on a week just past

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Dear [Ontario College]  
Executive Members

It is hard to believe that it is 1 week today since our Executive retreat in Thunder Bay, Ont. I am sorry I could not stay for the whole retreat, but as I watched the news conference from Toronto in my hotel room on Saturday afternoon, I realized that my place was back in my home base. It was hard enough trying to explain it to Claudette after the dinner. I would not have been able to confront all of you without becoming embarrassingly emotional. I even worried about the flight home. Even though all of the experts have been telling us that we are not contagious until we develop symptoms, I was still very uneasy about getting back to Toronto. The plane was half empty, so I took a seat at the back, many rows away from any other passengers. At one point, I even considered renting a car and driving home, but one look at the map convinced me that this was not a good idea.

It has been a crazy week here. Every day I arrive at the hospital to hear that more of my nurse and physician colleagues have been admitted overnight. Most of the 61 cases [of severe acute respiratory syndrome] in



our hospital are from this group.

I actually had a patient in labour on the Sunday evening. Even though she was doing well, I was told to come in and stimulate her labour with oxytocin since word was out that the labour and delivery unit would be shut down on Monday morning. In the end, she delivered a beautiful baby girl at 5:30 AM. It was a very emotional delivery for all of us because, as it turned out, it was one of the last deliveries

for North York General [Hospital]. The nurses and I had a good cry even though we were not allowed to give each other a badly needed hug.

The labour room was the last area of the hospital still open for business, and the feeling after the delivery was over cannot be described easily. For me, this part of the hospital has always felt like an integral part of my life. The knowledge that it would soon close left a feeling of emptiness in my heart.

I walked around the hospital before coming home at 7:00 AM. It reminded me of when I worked in a summer camp and the counselors would take one last walk around after the final bus of children had departed at the end of the summer. Each area of the hospital carries such powerful memories. I have been there

*Canadian Family Physician* invites you to contribute to *Reflections*. We are looking for personal stories or experiences that illustrate unique or intriguing aspects of life as seen by family physicians. The stories should be personal, have human interest, and be written from the heart. They are not meant to be analytical. Writing style should be direct and in the first person, and articles should be no more than 1000 words long. Consider sharing your story with your colleagues.

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almost since the doors first opened in 1969. I came on staff in 1974 when we were a quiet suburban community with lots of young families. Now we are a teaching hospital looking after a huge and aging community.

The doors to the emergency room were locked, and many units did not even have lights on. I do not know which was worse: the drive to the hospital, knowing I was putting myself in harm's way regardless of how many precautions were in place, or the drive home wondering when I would next have the opportunity for and joy of bringing a new life into the world.

I do not know if the word "hero" has any real context any more, but the nurses certainly come close to what I think of when the word comes up. That they are able to come to work each day knowing they are putting their health and the health of their families on the line for the good of others makes me wonder if the public really understands what that is like. As well, it has been awe-inspiring to see how all members of the hospital community have come together to support each other. Physicians, nurses, and everyone in administration have made a point of calling the families of those in hospital just to see whether they can help out with babysitting, picking up groceries, and so on. No one has pointed blame at anyone else because we all know it was no one's fault. This disease is like a tornado that has roared across the landscape of our city, and my hospital has taken a direct hit.

I have been under work quarantine this week. I can go to the hospital, go to the office to see urgent cases, and come home. If Anita comes into the room, I put on a mask. We eat in separate rooms and sleep in separate bedrooms. I am a bit concerned that she is starting to like the sleeping arrangements! At work, we screen everyone at the door including taking his or her temperature. Staff physicians must wear N95 masks, and I am actually getting used to the smell of Purell on my hands. The patients seem more concerned about my health than about their problems. I cannot tell you the number of comments and phone calls that have made me realize how important we all are to our patients and how genuinely they care about us.

Yesterday I really needed to make a housecall to one of my palliative care patients. To complicate matters, he and his family were under quarantine themselves because the patient had been discharged only a few days before. I spoke to Public Health and they gave me the go-ahead with several stipulations. I arranged for the clinical nurse specialist for our palliative care program to meet me there.

I cannot imagine how the neighbors felt watching us through their windows. There we were standing in the driveway, putting on plastic gowns, gloves, goggles, and masks. The wife and sons, also wearing masks, greeted us at the door. The patient was very appreciative of the visit. We needed to have a long talk about symptom control, the futility of further chemotherapy, and end-of-life decision making.

In the midst of the visit, my pager went off. It was my wife. She was in her office in the medical building at the University of Toronto and simply said, "Hi Val. Alisa (our daughter) wants to tell you something." Alisa came on the phone and said, "Daddy, I got into medical school!" There I was standing in the kitchen of this home, with tears in my eyes, realizing that one of the happiest moments of my life was unfolding. I wonder if the family noticed my red eyes through the goggles when I went back into the room.

So what do I tell my daughter about the future of medicine, the career she has been given the opportunity of making part of her life? I guess the short answer, given what we have witnessed this week, is that there is nothing in this world that can match the emotional and psychological highs and lows of medicine. She will be joining a proud tradition of men and women throughout history and across every continent of this planet who have used their best talents to make the world a safer place for their fellow travelers.

So that has been my week. I do not think any of us will ever forget what it has been like. We are all changed in one way or another by this new disease. We have got through the worst of it, I hope. Keep in touch.

Best regards to you all, Val.