

## Travelers: know your medical history

I read with interest the article,<sup>1</sup> "Preparing patients to travel abroad safely," in the January issue. As a Canadian physician practising emergency medicine in Florida for the past 17 years, I am amazed at how many Canadian patients I see, often very elderly, who spend several months of the winter in Florida.

I am also amazed that many of them have no idea of what their medications, allergies, or past or current medical conditions are. It would be of tremendous benefit if, before heading south, they were given a simple 1-page document listing their medications, dosages, allergies, and medical history. A recent electrocardiogram for patients with cardiac conditions would also be a help.

—John D. Foster, MD, CM, CCFP  
Atlantic Beach, Fla  
by e-mail

### Reference

1. Thomas RE. Preparing patients to travel abroad safely. Part 1: Taking a travel history and identifying special risks. *Can Fam Physician* 2000;46:132-8.

## Medical history in New Brunswick

Following the article<sup>1</sup> by Louisa Blair and the letter<sup>2</sup> by Dr Paul Bonisteel, I add a bit more Canadian medical history.<sup>3</sup>

Surgeon Guillaume Deschamps de Honfleur performed the first New Brunswick postmortem on the body of

a French scurvy victim on Docet Island in the St Croix River in the winter of 1604 to 1605. He was apparently the first European doctor in New Brunswick. Twenty-eight people died, mostly of scurvy.

There is a classic description of scurvy by barber-surgeon Samson Ripault on Philippe Rougemont, native of Amboise, who had just died at the age of about 20. The postmortem was done at Jacques Cartier's request during the winter of 1534.

The Indians at that time knew that a potion brewed from white spruce, that could be swallowed and in which limbs

could be soaked, would cause dramatic improvement. Jacques Cartier was given this information in 1534, but this news did not become widely known.

French law decreed that every ship leaving France must have a surgeon on board. This applied to small fishing vessels as well as larger ships, hence Acadia must have seen numerous surgeons between 1604 and 1755. Only a few can be named.

About 1650, Richard Denys detailed the duties of a surgeon: he must have a large medicine chest and barbering tools. He could earn extra money by trimming beards, cutting hair, and shaving the men. At the fishing station he acted as the cooks' helper, ready with a hot evening meal as the deep-laden boats returned at nightfall. He must provide garden vegetables. He must shoot or trap fowl and game for fresh meat. He had charge of the boys and apprentices and could punish them if necessary. He helped clean and fillet the fish, then carry them to drying stages. If he carried out his duties efficiently and cared for the ill and injured, he was allowed to keep the large medicine chest and its depleted drugs and supplies at the end of the voyage.

—Pierre L. Delva, MD, CCFP, FCFP  
St Andrews, NB  
by mail

### References

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2. Bonisteel P. A bit of Canadian medical history [letter]. *Can Fam Physician* 2000;46:35-6.
3. Stewart WB. *Medicine in New Brunswick*. Fredericton, NB: New Brunswick Medical Society; 1974. p. 1-3.

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