

# Reflections

## Family medicine *What's it all about?*

Linda Kirby

Family medicine seems to be losing ground as a career choice for medical students, and I wonder why. It seems to me that this particular medical specialty would be the most interesting, diverse, rewarding field of medicine (and perhaps the most difficult, in that you need to know something about all other specialties). If they plan to work in a rural area, this is particularly daunting to medical students. The rewards, however, must certainly outweigh the challenges. What do I know? I am not a family doctor. But I have worked with them for almost 15 years.

I would like to tell you what happened to me and Dr Bob Miller, Chair of Family Medicine at Memorial University of Newfoundland, during a tour we took to promote family medicine.

### Life in a rural community

We left Kingston, Ont, on a Tuesday morning, after presenting a promotion session the evening before to medical students



**Time for lunch:** *After nearly 20 years, Dr Bob Miller is remembered by former patients and co-workers everywhere he goes in Sharbot Lake.*

*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.

at Queen's University. We were on our way to the University of Ottawa to do another presentation that evening. On the way, we had to drive through Sharbot Lake, a small community of 500 people. Dr Miller practised there for 5 years and then left 19 years ago to come to Newfoundland. I had heard so much about Sharbot Lake from him that I was almost as excited as he was to visit this community and meet some of the people he worked with so long ago.

We park the car outside the clinic where Dr Miller used to practise. It is situated next to the lake. It is a clear fall day: fresh and clean and quiet. The clinic staff are at lunch, so there are no patients in the waiting room. We are met in the waiting room by Dr Peter Bell (who has been there almost 30 years). He was Dr Miller's partner. We also meet Dr Bell's current practice partner, who has worked in Newfoundland. Unfortunately,

**Ms Kirby** is Program Coordinator of the Family Medicine Residency Program at Memorial University of Newfoundland in St John's.

the long-time receptionist, Sandy, who also worked with Dr Miller, is off for the day. We meet the current staff and look around the clinic, which Dr Miller says has not changed a lot but has expanded. Dr Bell shows us the state-of-the-art computer system he is using.

Dr Bell suggests we drop by Sandy's house to see whether she is home. I wonder whether Dr Miller remembers where she lives. Of course he does! He has been there many times. We say goodbye to everyone and drive to Sandy's house. When we arrive at the house, we see that she and husband, Wayne, are doing some renovations. Unfortunately, neither one is home, but we do have a chat with the workers. I am sure that, before the day is through, most of the Sharbot Lake community will know we went to see Sandy and Wayne. That's life in a rural community!

We go to visit Wayne at work. Does Dr Miller remember where he works? Of course he does. On the way to Wayne's office, we pass the house where Dr Miller lived with his family. He wistfully says it looks like it needs a coat of paint. Many memories must be going through his mind. He tells me that, when he was on call at night, someone in the community would make arrangements for his children to be looked after. Everybody pitched in to help.

We go into Wayne's office; he is delighted to see Dr Miller and asks about his family. We chat with Wayne for a while, then we leave. On the way out of the building, a young woman stops Dr Miller and says, "I know you. You're Dr Miller." I look at this woman with amazement. She appears to be no more than 35 years old. She must have been only 15 when he left Sharbot Lake. How in the world does she remember him? Dr Miller leaves trying to remember who her parents were. That's life in a rural community.

### **Memories all around**

We head back to The Country Inn, the local restaurant and hotel, for something to eat. We sit down at a table, and Dr Miller recognizes someone at the other end of the room; he tries to remember her name. She is looking at him, too. He goes over to speak with her and they remember each other. They reminisce about his time as the family doctor in Sharbot Lake. She and her husband now run The Country Inn and used to

be friendly with another couple who would come for the summer to a nearby cottage. Dr Miller asks about this couple as well, and the parents. I sit back and watch them talk and marvel at how 20 years seem to have vanished into thin air. Dr Miller then rejoins me at the table, and the server comes to take our order. She remembers Dr Miller, too! In fact, when her daughter was born, Dr Miller performed a procedure on her newborn baby. That baby is currently planning her wedding!

I am truly amazed at the mark that has been left on this small rural community by this family doctor who has been gone for nearly 20 years. I hope that Dr Miller felt a sense of pride when he left Sharbot Lake that day. He certainly left a lasting impression. The rewards of family medicine are many, as are stories like this one. ♦