



# Residents' Page

## To Ireland and back

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Once upon a time in Canada, there were too many doctors. Billing numbers were rationed, medical school enrolment was reduced, and family practices were in high demand. During this time, a young Canadian traveler returned home intending to apply to medical school. She was discouraged by many and was told that there were already too many doctors. She applied anyway but was rejected. A second application resulted in an acceptance letter from her other country of citizenship, Ireland. After much thought, she decided to head overseas to pursue her medical dream. Fortunately, this story, like all good fairy tales, ends happily. I am an Irish Canadian international medical graduate (IMG), and this is my story.

It took me a while to decide on medicine as a career. Unlike some colleagues, I did not grow up with dreams of becoming a physician. My family were engineers and teachers. It was not until I spent a year teaching English in Japan that I first considered medicine. After 3 more years working as a research scientist, I finally took the plunge. Once I made the decision, I could not wait to start.

Despite my desire to enter medicine, I knew that going to Ireland would be risky. As a postgraduate, I would be classified as an IMG and be unable to enter the first round of the Canadian residency match. I decided that Ireland was a worthwhile risk. At least I would be entering my chosen field. And if I stayed in Ireland after graduation, being an hour from Paris could hardly be considered a hardship!

Once in Dublin, I did not have contact with the Canadian medical community until my second summer break. While in Kenora, Ont, I discussed my IMG status with a specialist visiting from Winnipeg, Man. This specialist indicated that returning to Canada would be almost

impossible. Not only was it difficult to access residency positions, but it might prove equally difficult to practise in Canada after postgraduate training overseas.

How discouraging! I left Kenora wondering whether I had made the wrong decision 2 years ago. Was it true that Canada had shut its doors to physicians outside North America? I was also concerned about the attitude of potential colleagues if I did return. Would I be considered inferior to Canadian graduates? I found this hard to believe. Many Canadian physicians had trained in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Surely the 300-year-old institution that was training me could produce high-quality physicians.

Because of my concerns, I worked hard to maximize my chances of returning to Canada. Although I loved life in Ireland, I knew that eventually I would want to return home. Fortunately, Medical Council of Canada regulations changed due to impending physician shortages. Now IMGs were able to sit the preridency examination during medical school, thereby eliminating delays in entering North American residency programs.

I entered both the American and Canadian matches and was selected by a Seattle-based program; I withdrew from the Canadian match. All seemed well. When some of my classmates were successful in the Canadian match, however, their jubilation jarred me. I realized that I wanted to go home, that family medicine in Canada was the right choice. Program administrators in Seattle were understanding and released me from my commitment. I accepted a position at the University of Manitoba.

Now I had to face my fears. How would my knowledge and skills compare? Would I experience

a bias against Canadians who studied abroad? I was determined to prove myself. Those first few months of residency had a steep learning curve, but I survived. I did occasionally hear insensitive comments about IMGs. I let my clinical skills and knowledge speak for themselves.

My story could have turned out quite differently. If I had adhered to the prevailing wisdom when applying to medical school, I would never have applied. The discouraging comment early in my training could have made me abandon my efforts to return for residency. Instead, I am finishing my second year in family medicine and winding up my job as Chief Resident. I have no regrets. The experience increased my independence and self-sufficiency and allowed me to enjoy my Irish heritage.

Despite the crisis of Canada's physician shortage, there is no shortage of young Canadians applying to medical school. In fact, they are so eager that they are willing to make financial sacrifices and endure separation from family to pursue their training

abroad. Every year, more Canadians are entering Irish medical schools, despite the recent increase in Canadian positions. In addition to filling manpower needs, IMGs offer a unique perspective on Canadian health care. With the continuing decline in physician numbers, this is the time to convince Canadians studying abroad to return, especially to family medicine.

I could have become an Irish general practitioner or entered the Seattle program. Fortunately, I ended up right where I belong. Despite problems with our health care system, I chose Canada because it is my home and because it is a great country. If you look around with the eyes of a new family medicine resident returning from Ireland, you will see that I am right. ❁

*Dr Keenan graduated from University College Dublin and recently completed residency at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. She will start her career serving as locum tenens around Manitoba.*

