



Reflections

Practising in northern Ontario

Why young physicians are choosing Timmins

Jocelyne Landry Cahill

The shortage of family physicians, nurses, and other health care professionals affects rural areas of Canada as well as urban centres. And the declining popularity of family medicine as a career choice for medical students only makes this problem worse.

Many of Canada's rural communities are grappling with weak economies, shrinking populations (due to lack of employment), and closure of small businesses. These events have an adverse effect not only on the economy, but also on the well-being of our small communities. Long wait times and inadequate access to family doctors are familiar stories across the country; so how do rural hospitals, such as Timmins and District Hospital, manage to recruit young physicians and keep them? Has the Northeastern Ontario Medical Education Corporation made it easier to recruit and retain physicians just embarking on a career? Physicians from Timmins offer some intriguing answers.

Dr Julie Auger is 35 years old. She was born and raised in Sturgeon Falls, located between North Bay and Sudbury in northern Ontario. She is a graduate of the University of Ottawa's Family Medicine Program. She reports that, as a young physician, her decision to return to northern Ontario and practise in Timmins was based on both professional and personal considerations.

Her parents, now retired, still live in Sturgeon Falls. She had fallen in love with a native of Timmins; they were married in February 2004. After weighing their options, she and her husband decided that Timmins would be a great place for them to set up a practice and put down roots.

In addition to being near her parents, four other factors helped her to decide in favour of Timmins: a good professional environment, a strong economy, the natural environment, and a friendly community.

As Dr Auger put it, "Doctors, like others, want to live in a prosperous, robust, and progressive environment. For now, Timmins is able to provide a healthy environment because of its great resources in forestry, mining, tourism, and health care." She added that education, arts, entertainment, and government services are, for the most part, easily accessible. She considers them a necessity for a healthy, functioning environment.

Dr Auger believes that she is fortunate to be working with a fine team of young and older physicians. She added that there is definitely a feeling of solidarity among colleagues, and there is no distinction between English-speaking and French-speaking physicians. "We all respect one another." She pointed out that there are many misconceptions about health care in northern Ontario: "The practice of medicine here is quite progressive and keeps up with new technologies."



Working with a fine team of physicians: Dr Julie Auger is Medical Program Director of the Continuing Care Program at Timmins and District Hospital.

According to Dr Auger, Timmins and District Hospital is one of the largest and most modern hospitals in northern Ontario. It is a fully accredited 159-bed facility (that serves communities including Matheson, Earlton, Kirkland Lake, New Liskeard, Haileybury, Engleheart, and Temagami, Ont) and provides a full range of services including long-term care, rehabilitation services, emergency services, and maternity care. Timmins and District Hospital has state-of-the-art equipment, including diagnostic imaging equipment for general radiography, fluoroscopy, mammography, and computed tomography.

Still, Dr Auger has a message for other young physicians: "In essence, Timmins, like the rest of Canada, is still short of doctors. However, we hope that other young physicians will come and join our team and see for themselves that northern Ontario has a lot to offer."

Dr Lesley Griffiths, 30 years old, was born and raised in Markham, Ont, a 45-minute drive north of Toronto. She is a graduate of the Undergraduate Medical Program at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ont.



Completing residency training in Timmins a crucial factor: Dr Lesley Griffiths is a physician at Timmins and District Hospital.

As a young physician, Dr Griffiths decided to enrol in the Northeastern Ontario Family Medicine Program (affiliated with the University of Ottawa) in Sudbury. This unique postgraduate program offers residents an opportunity to complete their training in various parts of northeastern Ontario. The program is designed to give residents a taste for working in a variety of communities in the northeast, including Timmins, Sudbury, North Bay, Huntsville, Manitoulin Island, and Sault Ste Marie.

Dr Griffiths did various clinical placements throughout the region. When she was in Timmins to complete her residency training, however, she was "blown away" by the team spirit and unity at Timmins and District Hospital. "Whether it was the physicians, the support staff, or other health care providers, it became ... apparent to me that there was very positive energy there," Dr Griffiths stated. "Being the new physician on the block, you never quite know how you are going to be received and treated. However, I was made to feel like my opinion was valued and sought out, even in the presence of older, established physicians. It was terrific!"

Dr Griffiths said that completing her residency training in Timmins was a crucial factor in her final decision to settle there.

The whole medical community made it so welcoming for me—Dr Harry Voogjarv, Chief of Staff; Dr Arul Raveendran, obstetrician-gynecologist; Dr Chris Loretto, Emergency Director; and Brenda Corbeil, Human Resources, to name a few—it was absolutely astounding! I have never felt so welcomed or appreciated like this before. ...

My Timmins story would not be complete if I didn't mention Dr Larry Malo and his wife Dr Nancy Woods, who were instrumental in my decision to settle here and join their practice. Larry and Nancy are wonderful people and extraordinary physicians. They have both made me feel so welcomed and part of their very own family.

And this is very special to me, as my own family happens to be in Markham, which is an 8-hour drive from here. I'm delighted to be joining their team, which includes their dog, Bear, who brings a certain family atmosphere and serenity to the office. ...

Bottom line: had I not enrolled in the Northeastern Ontario Family Medicine Program, Timmins would not have been on my list of areas to settle in. Without hesitation, this definitely provided me with [the range] of experiences that enabled me to make the right decision for me. Northern Ontario happens to be the right choice for me right now.

Both natives of Toronto, Dr Larry Malo, 46, and his wife Dr Nancy Woods, 48, are well respected physicians in Timmins. Lynda Hocevar, a Registered Nurse at Timmins and District Hospital, explains, "What Dr Malo and Dr Woods have managed to do for the community is simply phenomenal, and they are to be admired and commended for being pillars of the community."


Ms Hocevar also mentioned that, to provide further assistance to his colleagues and help with the workload, Dr Malo took a year off from his busy practice to take a GP anesthesia training program.



"We are a tightly knit group": Dr Larry Malo is a physician and GP anesthetist and Dr Nancy Wood is a physician, both at Timmins and District Hospital.

His willingness to take time away from his family and other obligations, his dedication, and his big heart are all reasons physicians like him are to be admired.

Dr Malo said that, although he was a native of Toronto, he felt privileged to be working in Timmins, with excellent colleagues and a young team of doctors: "We are a tightly knit group here. The cooperation between physicians here is absolutely unparalleled. With the shortage of physicians and health care professionals, it is imperative that we work in unity and maintain good team spirit."

Drs Auger, Griffiths, Malo, and Woods said they were delighted to hear about the progress on the joint initiative between Lakehead University in Thunder Bay and Laurentian University in Sudbury to create the Northern Ontario School of Medicine, with two new medical campuses scheduled to open in 2005. They believe that a school in the north can provide high-quality medical education and give young graduates an opportunity to live and practise in northern Ontario. 

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Natural environment rivals professional environment near Timmins, Ont

