



Rediscovering family medicine

College to create section of medical students

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During our recent Family Medicine Forum in Quebec City, Que, a member from a mid-sized community in western Canada approached me to say she was taken with the large number of enthusiastic medical students in attendance and wanted to tell us how pleased she was with the College programs now in place to try to reach out to them. Seeing the things the CFPC was doing to make medical students more aware of family practice, she wanted to do what she could to help students appreciate how much patients needed them and how satisfying their careers could be as family physicians.

This kind of message from family doctors willing to act as mentors, teachers, and role models for medical students is critical to the future of family practice. No factors have as much effect on students trying to decide which specialty to select as do practising physicians who share their clinical experiences and personal perspectives. The value and importance of family doctors in every community across Canada spending some time with students and residents cannot be overestimated.

For students, perhaps the most powerful motivating message about family medicine is actually being delivered by the public. Poll after poll indicates that the people of Canada highly value having family physicians and consider the shortage of family doctors to be one of the biggest problems facing this country's health care system.

Fortunately, the past few years have marked the beginning of a turnaround in the popularity of family medicine as a career choice for medical school graduates. The number selecting family medicine as their first choice recovered from a low of 23% in 2003 to more than 31% this past year, and these graduates filled 38% of the PGY-1 positions across the country. This is very encouraging, but it is still not enough: 40% to 45% of these spots must be filled by students heading into family medicine in order to sustain the number of family physicians needed to care for our population.

Students are recognizing that family medicine is a respected specialty equal to all other medical disciplines. With signals coming from most of the provinces and territories about better support for new models of practice offering family physicians more balanced lifestyles and increased remuneration, the future is looking brighter.

Students themselves are playing a vital role in delivering positive messages about a future in family medicine. In growing numbers they are developing and leading family medicine interest groups (FMIGs) at all medical schools in

Canada, offering opportunities for fellow students to meet with one another and with local family doctors outside the boundaries of the regular medical school curriculum. They discuss the realities of a family practice career, review clinical topics from the perspective of family physicians, learn to perform common family practice procedures that are often not part of their formal training programs, and gain a better understanding of what the specialty of family medicine has to offer. The FMIGs are led by students who are supported by their undergraduate deans, departments of family medicine, and our provincial Chapters. The overall resource support and coordination of activities, including bringing students from all the FMIGs across Canada together for 2 national forums each year, is now a priority of our national College.

With the outstanding support of Scotiabank, the CFPC has also established 2 award programs: medical student and family medicine resident leadership awards to recognize and help develop our future leaders; and medical student scholarships that each year, beginning in 2007, will see \$10000 scholarships awarded to outstanding students in family medicine at each of the 17 medical schools in Canada. The CFPC, Scotiabank, and Health Canada have also partnered in supporting the FMIGs, which, along with fulfilling many other responsibilities, will help oversee this scholarship program.

In October 2006, following meetings with medical student representatives from across the country, delegates at the CFPC Board and Annual General Meeting approved 2 historic resolutions: that medical students be added to the CFPC Board of Directors with 2 full voting seats and that the CFPC establish a new Section of Medical Students. Membership will likely include all students who become part of FMIGs at their medical schools. The interest and enthusiasm of the students regarding these moves has been overwhelming. Sharing the CFPC view, students have indicated they see this as a great opportunity for ongoing relationship building between our specialty and its future physicians.

There are many more challenges to be addressed, but with family doctors across Canada acting as role models for students and the ongoing support from such partners as Health Canada and Scotiabank, the College will continue to reach out to medical students in many new and exciting ways. If early returns are anything to go by, the students are responding. They are rediscovering family medicine. 