

David Pontin MD CCFP(EM)

Dr David Pontin wasn't born in the north. He didn't live in the north when he was growing up—he's a British Columbia boy. But he's from Yellowknife, now; it's home. After spending a few years in the Northwest Territories practising emergency medicine in what was originally believed to be a temporary reprieve from Victoria, BC, a string of plane crashes occurred in Yellowknife. One of these crashes occurred in Dr Pontin's neighbourhood. A Twin Otter with 10 occupants—8 passengers and 2 pilots—hit a 3-story building just down the road, far enough away that Dr Pontin didn't hear the commotion. He received a call from an airstrip from one of his friends. "Dave, can you help? A plane hit a building close to where you live."

Yellowknife's a small place where doctors are a part of the community. Dr Pontin got a call from a friend before the hospital's disaster plan kicked into gear. He left his house for the inferno—as Dante wrote, Let us descend into the blind world. Neighbours scrambled to extricate bodies from the plane in disastrous conditions: jet fuel stained the senses; soot blew about; power lines fell, cracking on the ground. The problem with disasters is the conditions—disastrous.

The pilots were discovered pulseless, breathless, and Dr Pontin trained bystanders in CPR. He supervised 2 arrests simultaneously. All 8 passengers lived and were taken to the local hospital. The fire department came and secured the scene. Concern turned to the office building: was anybody inside? Yes. A woman was inside, working, when the plane hit. Dr Pontin knew her. He worked with her as part of his role in health research. She was physically unharmed.

This airplane crash was part of a number of crashes that happened in Yellowknife that year. There is an awful bond formed when one walks out of a house to run a disaster triage situation, a bond intensified after attending, in series, the funerals of people one has come to know and love in the community. Dr Pontin and his young family (including family physician Jennifer Harris, Dr Pontin's wife) consider the place home, and their concept of home involves more than grief. It incorporates the wilderness surrounding Yellowknife, its unique people (including the Dene), and the grand experience of being alive. 🍁

Cover photo: Cathie Ferguson, Victoria, BC

Story: Shane Neilson MD CCFP, Erin, Ont

Additional photos and the French translation of the story appear on page 1334.

D'autres photos et la traduction en français du récit se trouvent à la page 1334.