

Mary Lynne Atkinson MD CCFP FCFP

Dr Atkinson retired from family medicine in 2004 at the age of 55. She had worked as a doctor for over 28 years; her husband had been retired from the Ontario Provincial Police for a number of years; and after a long gestation, the 36-foot fibreglass sailboat Zingaro—a boat Dr Atkinson and her husband constructed together—was finally ready for the water. It seemed like a good time to sail; working every day as a doctor became draining, a long commute became a strain.

When winter came in the year of her retirement, Dr Atkinson and her husband sailed to Florida from Silver Islet by using the top end of Lake Superior, moving through the North Channel, on to Georgian Bay, Lake Huron, Lake Erie, the Erie Barge Canal, the Hudson River, then down the Jersey shore, eventually making the Intracoastal Waterway. The physical work and engagement of being a crew member on a sailing ship kept Dr Atkinson active and busy; on arrival in Florida, there was snorkeling to do, and fishing holes to explore in a dinghy. After 10 months spent reaching a goal, Dr Atkinson arrived at the land of the retired. She had 6 weeks to discover what to do.

Zingaro was left in a Miami marina, and Dr Atkinson returned to Canada where she resumed practising medicine. She works 8 months of the year; the remaining 4 months of the year are spent in the Northern Abaco Islands of the Bahamas aboard Zingaro. She calls this her “semiretirement.” When asked why she needed to return to practising medicine, Dr Atkinson confesses that the practice of medicine was the practice of her life: not medicine for money or patient affection but for the simple love of engagement in a human activity.

She tells the nurses she works with that she’ll practise medicine even if she “needs a wheelchair.” She has no plans for retirement. At the marina where Zingaro is docked there are 20 other foreign boats. All of the owners of the boats are retired; almost all of the owners won’t work again, glad to be free of their old occupations. A fire chief who hated the stress; a mechanic who couldn’t do the physical work anymore; a vet who knew he was done. But one of the boats is owned by 2 married airline pilots, and it will soon be sold; although the pilots disliked international travel apart from one another, they realized they wanted to travel together. The sale of the boat will go toward the purchase of an airplane, and the pilots will continue to go abroad, only on their own schedule.

At 2 to 3 days per week for 8 months of the year, and with flexible hours, Dr Atkinson has a schedule that combines taking medicine with leaving it, for the enrichment of both. She doesn’t know a 64-year-old in her own life who is as enthusiastic about going to work in the morning as she is. 🍁

Cover photo: Alan Dickson Photography Inc, Thunder Bay, Ont
Story: Shane Neilson MD CCFP, Erin, Ont

Additional photos and the French translation of the story appear on page 312.
D’autres photos et la traduction en français du récit se trouvent à la page 312.