



Poetry, decisions, and societal need

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*But I am prejudiced beyond debate
In favor of my right to choose which side
shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight.*
Bonaro Overstreet¹

As I went through school, the only subject I ever needed a bit of tutoring in was poetry; having said that, over the years the occasional poem has resonated with me. One that I find particularly meaningful is “Stubborn Ounces (To One Who Doubts the Worth of Doing Anything If You Can’t Do Anything)” by Bonaro Overstreet,¹ an American author and psychologist. Although published almost 60 years ago, it speaks to me of family medicine and the decisions physicians make as their careers evolve over time. Overstreet challenges those who believe that “the little efforts that I make” will never “tip the hovering scale,” and argues she has the “right to choose which side/shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight.”¹

I first heard Overstreet’s poem at the memorial of Dr Margaret Mahood, a remarkable woman and physician, who was a lifelong advocate for what she believed in and one of the pioneers of Medicare in Saskatchewan. It immediately brought to mind the care I provide to individual patients. It reminded me that every interaction we have with our patients or action we take on their behalf is an opportunity to move the scales in the right direction for them. As I have had time to reflect further on the poem, it also connects me to our second principle, which describes family medicine as based in the community and strongly influenced by community factors.² It reminds me of the important role family

physicians play in their communities as health advocates and leaders. Our engagement in activities of the health system or other endeavours can not only have an important effect on individuals, but also on the society in which we live. We can add that needed weight to help tip the scale in a community.

These thoughts lead me to further reflect on how the overall health of the community and its needs affect the decisions we make about the nature of our individual practices within the discipline of family medicine, of how our practices evolve as the needs of our patients and the community change over time. In many ways we can think of our careers as being that scale, and that societal need is one of the important weights that shifts the balance as our practices evolve over time.

There are many other important factors that influence the decisions we make throughout our careers; however, it is important that we speak of this critical effect of community and societal need when we share our love for family medicine and its diversity. This is particularly true when speaking to a student who is contemplating a career in family medicine or a resident who is making decisions about the nature of his or her career in its infancy. As we look to the future of our discipline, we must remember the important role of societal need and our accountability to the community we serve. 

References

1. Overstreet BW. Stubborn ounces (to one who doubts the worth of doing anything if you can’t do anything). In: *Hands laid upon the wind*. New York, NY: Norton; 1955.
2. College of Family Physicians of Canada [website]. *Four principles of family medicine*. Mississauga, ON: College of Family Physicians of Canada; 2006. Available from: www.cfpc.ca/principles. Accessed 2014 Apr 8.

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