



A horse-and-buggy kind of doctor

Sarah Saunders MD

I write this on what would have been my grandfather's 90th birthday. I wish that I could hold his hand and tell him how much I love him. My 6-month-old daughter's hands remind me of his—the same long, delicate fingers. Maybe one day we'll buy her a piano and her fingers will dance like his did. He never had the chance to meet her but he gave her a decoration for her first Christmas tree: a wooden plane, because flying was another of his passions.

When my grandfather passed away I wanted to tell the world about his amazing life and the gifts he'd given me.



But as a busy new mom and resident, it's only today, as I remember him on his birthday, that I finally have the chance.

My grandfather, Dr John (Jack) Settle, was raised in Alberta, in a family where education mattered. While I'm sure his parents supported his decision to pursue medicine, it is actually a roundabout love story that got him started. Grandpa joined the army in 1943 to become the marrying type—the type with a regular pay cheque. He had hoped to become a pilot, but his eyesight and asthma set him on an academic path. His studiousness and affinity for technology landed him in training as an x-ray technician, and after that he worked as a radiographer for the Royal Canadian Army Medical Corps. Upon discharge after the war, he was offered land or an education; with a couple of kids already in tow, he set his sights high and set off to university.

My grandfather got his bachelor of science degree from the University of Alberta in 1948, working several jobs along the way, including on-call shifts as an x-ray technician. In 1952 he earned his medical degree and interned at University Hospital in Edmonton. He recalled being the favourite intern on the pediatrics ward because he found a way to sharpen the reusable needles, making the pokes less painful. (I can't fathom resterilizing needles, let alone sharpening them!) He then took a job in Red Deer, Alta, at the Parsons Clinic, working with 9 physicians. Although he hadn't the usual training, because of his affinity for radiology he was recruited to work informally as a radiologist under Dr Bill Parsons' supervision, getting special dispensation to do so.

In Red Deer my grandfather truly was a "horse-and-buggy" family doctor, even attending the scenes of accidents, riding there and back in the hearse—the only "ambulance" in town, so he claimed, and if things didn't work out, the next stop was the funeral home. He did autopsies, worked in the laboratory, and took out a handful of tonsils and the occasional appendix.


After 9 years, Grandpa moved his family to Calgary, Alta. He moved into a storefront office on Northmount Drive and quickly built up a full-scale family practice. He was active in mental health and alcohol treatment programs, established a nursing home-care program, and worked in obstetrics (he delivered 10000 babies over his career—including one on a neighbour's lawn!). He held staff positions at the Calgary General, Holy Cross, Grace Maternity, and Foothills hospitals, until he reached the age of 65. As Assistant Professor in family medicine at the University of Calgary he mentored students, most recently in a doctor-patient relations course, and taught the "art" of medicine.

My grandfather held countless memberships and board positions with committees and in the past 20 years was granted senior life membership by most of them. In 2004 the Alberta Medical Association honoured him with a Long-Service Award for selflessly contributing his knowledge, skill, and time to the advancement of the profession; and in 2006 the Calgary Medical Society named him Physician of the Year for his outstanding service and for exemplifying the spirit of camaraderie and community.

I've come across a handful of articles that Grandpa wrote and published in Canadian medical journals, and I find it wonderful to hear in these his voice as a young physician, debating, for example, the fall of the family physician and the rise of the specialist in hospitals, and as a patient himself, detailing an experience in the emergency department a few years ago.

Instead of winding down his career, my grandfather ended his profession in 3 positions—working in his own practice, checking laboratory results at a walk-in clinic, and providing care as a house physician at a nursing home. He couldn't believe that someone was willing to pay him to do these jobs! In the final years of his practice, he was one of the few physicians who still made housecalls; he was delighted that he could not only play music with his patients in their homes but that they would even make him a cup of tea! For many ailments of the elderly, what better therapeutic intervention is there? Working until he could no longer, he retired just months before his 89th birthday.

Many will remember my grandfather fondly. The lives he touched cannot be counted; mine is one of them. Grandpa never pushed or even encouraged me to enter medicine, but when I did, it was as if I had joined an exclusive club. I got handwritten letters about the latest medical advances, and sometimes about his own health too. I heard the stories of his training, which were fascinating, and although my grandfather had seen everything in his professional life, he was always impressed by my stories and firsts.

Having said goodbye, there is no use in having regrets, but I have a few anyway. I regret not taking Grandpa's bribes of a nickel a minute to practise piano; I have his fingers too, but not his ear, which I hope my daughter has inherited. I *don't* regret not flying with him—his eyesight was never great. What I regret most is not spending more time with him in his professional life, which was practised with empathy and compassion; I could have learned so much from him. He saw who his patients really were, and their real needs; his care in their elderly years was not medicine as we think of it, but companionship, music, and good jokes. His long and inspiring professional life was marked by a keen appetite for learning, hard work, mentoring, and, above all, service to his patients. I can only hope for such a fulfilling career. 

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Competing interests
None declared

