



Importance of Certification

David White MD CCFP FCFP

On a beautiful morning in May, I traveled to Parry Sound, Ont, with a small delegation representing the College and the Northern Ontario School of Medicine (NOSM) to award posthumous Certification in Family Medicine to Dr Aaron Higgins at a ceremony for family, friends, and colleagues.

Dr Higgins was diagnosed with cancer while a resident at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg. With dedication and courage, he persevered in his program through surgery and subsequent treatments. Eventually, he transferred to the residency program at NOSM in Parry Sound to be closer to family and the ongoing medical care he needed. He died as he neared completion of residency, before the final examinations.

The request from NOSM that the College board consider awarding posthumous Certification was unprecedented for our College. College staff gathered information on practices from other degree-granting bodies, including the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada. With this knowledge and the evidence of Dr Higgins' success in his program, the board unanimously approved granting of Certification.

The ceremony took place in the beautiful boardroom of the West Parry Sound Health Centre. The hospital's surgical schedule was adjusted to allow medical staff to attend. Dr Higgins' achievements and personal journey were described by several colleagues, including Dr Cathy Cervin, NOSM's Associate Dean of Postgraduate Education. My role as President was to officially present the Certification document to Aaron's wife, Jennifer. In doing so, I reminded the group that this was true Certification, not an honorary or compassionate recognition. Dr Higgins had earned this important designation, just like his fellow graduates and all Certificants of the College did.

The occasion was filled with emotion. There was sorrow for a young physician, husband, son, and father, whose life was cut short. And it was mixed with the happiness and pride that accompany every graduation.

Personally, I find myself returning to the event, reflecting on what it means to become a family physician. The goal of our residency is to prepare graduates to begin practice in any community in Canada. Family medicine is

a broad discipline: inevitably one's own practice is shaped by the needs of the community and the patients we serve.

The first years in practice are a crucial stage in the evolution of practice. Following the formal part of the ceremony for Dr Higgins, I had the opportunity to speak with several physicians who attended. One was a recent graduate of the family medicine program at the University of Montreal in Quebec who had been recruited to work as a hospitalist. Shortly after her arrival, a combination of retirements and maternity leaves led to a sudden shortage of physicians to work in the emergency department. Her new colleagues approached her to help fill the gap. She was a bit apprehensive; she made it clear she had not undertaken a third-year program in emergency medicine. But with encouragement and the promise of support from experienced colleagues, she agreed to help. She spoke, with shy pride, about how well it had worked out. And she credited the reason: "The doctors here, they all have my back."

I met Aaron's parents. His father, Dr Tom Higgins, is a family doctor who has served Parry Sound for 37 years. It is difficult to fathom the deep sense of loss he must feel, but on that day, his pride that his son had joined him as a fellow Certificant in Family Medicine was palpable.

One of the enormous privileges of my Presidency is the opportunity to meet family physicians throughout our country. Members of our College are deeply aware of the trust that the people in Canada place in us, of the esteem that is conveyed by our commitment to maintaining the high standards of Certification through lifelong learning, and our mission to meet the health needs of our patients and communities.

Dr Pravinsagar Mehta, the 2016 Family Physician of the Year, described the importance of Certification best: "The College is recognized nationally and internationally I can go anywhere in the world and say ... I'm a Certificant of the College of Family Physicians of Canada So if you say that you belong to the College of Family Physicians of Canada, you don't have to say anything else."¹

Reference

1. College of Family Physicians of Canada [website]. *Pravinsagar Mehta* [video]. Mississauga, ON: College of Family Physicians of Canada; 2017. Available from: <http://discovercfc.ca/dr-mehta/>. Accessed 2017 Jun 5.