

Power of the locum

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When I exited residency I felt confident that I knew what I wanted in my clinical career. I had completed a range of electives and had rotated through a variety of family medicine clinics and emergency departments, and so I believed I had a reasonable idea of what my priorities were. However, the transition from a resident on June 30th to an independent practising physician on July 1st came with a number of interesting surprises. I found that the knowledge and clinical experiences that I had gathered throughout my training, while excellent, had considerable gaps; administrative structures, overhead and billing formulae, holiday time, and colleague coverage were only some of the issues that I had not been fully exposed to. Pulling back the curtain on the administrative or departmental meetings that were taking place allowed me to appreciate that there was far more going on behind the scenes of a group practice than I had initially known about or would have been exposed to as a resident.

Fast forward a few years and by now I have done locum work for various types of family medicine practices and shifts in more than 16 different emergency departments, ranging from rural to academic settings. The perspective I have gained from these locum experiences has been invaluable, enabling me to refine what I am looking for in clinical practice and in a future practice group, to sidestep potential professional potholes, and to prepare for becoming a maximally contributing member of a team and medical community. Beyond expanding one's perspective and understanding about future practice, the benefits of doing locum work include supporting colleagues, fostering mentorship, being exposed to diverse experiences, and developing greater appreciation of the family physician role.

Some of the benefits

Supporting colleagues. Providing locum work has enabled my colleagues to have time for vacations, maternity leave, and continuing medical education. It has been recognized that locum coverage can be a key component of supporting the sustainability of family physicians, particularly in rural environments.¹ In fact, the lack of locum coverage has historically been identified as a challenge in these settings, and might contribute to burnout and retention issues.²

Fostering mentorship. I have benefited immensely by fostering mentorship relationships with senior colleagues in a variety of settings. Both informal and formal mentorships in medical practice can be powerful in helping to plan a career; however, more than half of new family doctors in Canada report not having a mentor.³ Seeing how various colleagues structure their

practices can be incredibly helpful when planning for your own practice, as is having a supportive network to tap into when times get tough.

Being exposed to diverse experiences. Both flexibility and breadth of experience have been identified as common rewards from locum placements.⁴ For my part, I found each community, hospital, or practice setting that I worked in had its own unique challenges and needs. From single coverage clinics or emergency departments, to large multidisciplinary centres with medical learners, each environment gave me a unique perspective on the evolving population and the health care landscape that we work in. Each placement left me with pearls of knowledge, such as to never underestimate a farmer's health complaint, and allowed me to build and maintain a broad range of skills that I now bring to my daily practice. I have also been blown away by the immense beauty that often hides just around the corner, and the kindness of strangers welcoming me to their city, town, and practices.

Developing greater appreciation of the family physician role. Having an opportunity to live and work in different settings has also allowed me to appreciate the unique role that family physicians play in medicine, as well as in their communities. Veritably from birth until death—from obstetric and newborn care through to palliative and end-of-life care—no other physician group carries this unique lens on the health of a population. The depth of the relationship that is fostered when a family physician cares for a patient through the many ups and downs of life is an integral part of health care, and one that is the foundation of our profession. Witnessing the broad expertise and diversity of family practice through locum work has been inspiring.

Further considerations

After making the decision to do locum work, there are several important factors that still need to be considered. In addition to reviewing the tips presented in previously published *Canadian Family Physician* articles that can help ensure a successful locum experience,^{5,6} I suggest that you also consider the following.

Your personal medical inventory. What skills and comfort level do you bring with you? Are you comfortable delivering babies, doing hospitalist work, or covering the emergency department? What level of on-site support or backup do you need? Locum placements come with a variety of opportunities and the first key step to being prepared is knowing what your comfort and skill levels are. Another important step is reflecting on what you are


willing to learn, as there are often excellent opportunities for support and mentorship in the community if you are willing to pick up additional skills and are either staying for a while or planning to return. More than anything, it is important to be up front with the care team about what your comfort level and limitations might be.

Your availability and flexibility. A short-term, one-off locum is a far different experience than a long-term locum or repeat locum. Reflect on what you might be willing to commit to, as that can dramatically change the type of experience available. A long-term or repeat locum relationship allows you to contribute in different ways and see more of how the team functions as a whole. Also, think about any family or relationship commitments you might have, as these can affect what opportunities you might want to pursue—be it individually or as a couple or family. Communicating your availability, and any potential challenges, can help smooth the transition to your locum experience and help you and the host team or community prepare.

Your timeline and goals. Some locum physicians love the balance of flexibility and variety, and there is some suggestion, particularly in the United States, that a growing number of physicians are making a career out of it.⁷ Others see it as a temporary way to explore options and gain experience, with one Canadian study showing that more than 40% of new graduates who worked as locums ended up practising in a location they had previously worked in.⁴ It is helpful to consider what your goals

are in regards to your locum placements when outlining your early career. Are you time limited and hoping to do locums for a specific period of time? Are you looking for a specific practice to settle in, or to get a certain feeling of comfort and skill before settling into your own practice? Many communities are eager to recruit new physicians, so let them show you what their community has to offer and your experience will be richer for it!

Conclusion

Working as a locum physician can be a great way to expand your perspective and find a future home for your practice while also helping your colleagues, developing great experience, and finding rewarding mentorships. Go in with a structured approach and an open mind. Good luck! 

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Competing interests

None declared

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