

Embracing the light, honouring the darkness

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I find December to be a complex month. The holiday break is welcome for many. Others find the holidays to be a sad time, and many have to do extra work during this season. The days are shorter, darker, and colder, but displays of holiday lights are cheerful and warm.

Years ago, our family began a tradition of a solstice celebration. The focus is on honouring the dark and the light at the time of the longest night and the slow beginning of the return of the sun to the northern hemisphere. We serve light and dark fondues (cheese with fresh baguette for the meal; chocolate with fresh fruit for dessert). We sit in a circle, pause, and reflect on what we might want to leave behind in the dark and what we want to embrace for the light. This has been a respite from holiday busyness and an easier coming together than Christmas, which we also celebrate.

I want to acknowledge the difficulty, uncertainty, and tragedy of this past year, which has stressed and harmed so many Canadians who live in precarious and dangerous conditions, and to acknowledge all of you as family physicians facing your own personal, financial, or family difficulties while caring for and supporting your patients through their difficult times.

For me, the awards ceremony at Family Medicine Forum is always a bright spot—even more so in this dark year. I hope many of you were there virtually to celebrate the achievements of our colleagues and friends. Strong themes were present: passionate advocacy for underserved Indigenous peoples and communities (Catherine Cook, Mike Kirlaw); youth, energy, and commitment to education and the voices of patients and communities (Antoine Boivin, Nicole Stockley, Kim Lazare); the centrality of public health to our well-being (Bonnie Henry, Jennifer Russell); and remembering the climate and environmental emergency that has been eclipsed by the pandemic (Itua Iriogbe).

A theme from many of the award winners was service—in the best sense of the word: *to help to achieve, to be useful, to work for*. The pandemic exposed and worsened long-standing problems and inequities. The ideas and quotations below from our award winners could guide us toward better structures, policies, and advocacy.

- Catherine Cook, recipient of the Calvin L. Gutkin Family Medicine Ambassador Award, which recognizes a dynamic leader in Canadian family medicine distinguished for their vision, innovation, and ability to build effective relationships: “The focus on the research question is one that is important to [Indigenous] communities as opposed to one that is important primarily to the researcher.”¹

- Antoine Boivin, family physician and Canada Research Chair in Patient and Public Partnership, awarded the Donald I. Rice Scholarship for outstanding contributions to teaching, vision, and leadership in the discipline of family medicine: “Patients are experts in their illness experience, life context and preferences Patient participation in guidelines committees could enhance the role of patients in clinical decision-making.”²
- Mike Kirlaw, awarded the Jean-Pierre Despins award for being an outstanding advocate and public spokesperson for family medicine, family physicians, and their patients: “That’s really where the advocacy fire starts to burn,”³ describing how in fly-in Indigenous communities he has seen children without asthma medication struggle to breathe and others wail with broken bones because he does not have the provisions to numb their pain.
- George Carson, obstetrician-gynecologist, awarded honorary CFPC membership for his consistent advocacy for family medicine maternity care and rural obstetrics: “In medicine, as in life, more is not always better. The best medicine is based on evidence, and Choosing Wisely lists are a good reminder of how we can continue to improve the quality of care we provide.”⁴
- Sandy Buchman, recipient of the W. Victor Johnston award, given to a renowned Canadian or international family medicine leader with continuous and enduring contributions to the discipline of family medicine, has devoted volunteer hours to helping provide hospice care for the homeless and has participated in medical missions to Africa and South America.

If you need encouragement and inspiration in this dark part of the year, please visit fadm.cfpc.ca/h-a/about-honours-and-awards, where you can read about the other amazing family physicians, clinicians, educators, researchers, and leaders that I sadly do not have space to mention.

These award recipients underline the importance of the work of family medicine and the service you provide every day to your patients and communities. I feel that each of you deserves an award—please take a moment to reflect on a patient for whom your care was life changing and the difference you make in the community where you work.

As President I will work to open many dialogues with you (cathycervin@cfpc.ca). What is keeping you up at night? What are you celebrating and enjoying in your work? What does the College need to know and do to serve you better? 🌟

References

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