



Family medicine growth rings

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Dendrochronology is the science of using annual growth rings in trees and wood to estimate the timing of historic events, interpret changes in the environment, and date archeological finds. Careers are commonly measured in years, but for the density of a comprehensive family practice, years are too shallow a descriptor. As with tree growth, some years in practice are marked in our memories as seasons of plenty and some as seasons of survival. It would be nice to capture that record in a physical form.

The northern peninsula of Newfoundland has a dense forest of conifer trees. In my early years, my father, a jack of all trades, established a sawmill with his brother to make inexpensive lumber from small timber that was used to build sheds, wharves, and stages. When you grow up around a mill, sawdust and wood get in your blood. As I graduated high school in 1992, at the same time as the Canadian government's imposition of the cod moratorium,¹ my father encouraged me to think big, which included a possible exodus from working in trades such as carpentry or fishing.

Fast-forward 10 years. After I had received a stunningly comprehensive medical education at Memorial University of Newfoundland in St John's and from the Family Medicine North residency program in Thunder Bay, Ont, Drs Jim and Leslie Rourke recruited me to work in Goderich, Ont. At the time, and even while I was unaware of the clinic's elite supporting cast, there was a dream opening available as a comprehensive family physician. The medical practice offered everything I had desired in a role—obstetrics, general surgery assistance, emergency medicine, inpatient care, coroner duties, and long-term care, all in a smoothly operating clinic.

But then there was the sawdust. During residency, I had dabbled by covertly converting a spare bedroom into a work shed where I could build furniture. My 80-year-old landlord was not impressed with the wood chips he found deep in the shag carpet, but he was understanding, nonetheless. In the north, hardwoods had been pricey for a resident, but in southern Ontario I was able to find old, impressive hardwoods everywhere.

Seeking a sawdust guru, I happened to meet a compassionate retired bank executive, Maurice Desnoyer. He chose early retirement; bought a farm in Ancaster, Ont; collected tractors; and rescued fallen cherry, walnut, and maple trees from landfills and chimneys to convert them into high-quality furniture. Luckily for me, he accepted me as his apprentice. Over the course of 2 months during my

first year of family practice, I completed an additional residency in woodworking, learning the arts of sawing and furniture building while gaining a deeper knowledge of the growth of these magnificent trees. It was while cutting these large old-growth trees, whose rings were so incredibly vibrant, that a career metaphor emerged in my mind. For each year of practice, I settled on a specific word that best represented a key career concept, lesson, or ideological theme that I had fully or finally understood in that year. I initially taped tabs of paper with these words printed on them to my stethoscope, like tree rings:

- 2003: Empathy
- 2004: Altruism
- 2005: Connection
- 2006: Sacrifice
- 2007: Compassion
- 2008: Dignity
- 2009: Humanism
- 2010: Community
- 2011: Competence
- 2012: Professionalism
- 2013: Mentorship
- 2014: Expectation
- 2015: Comfort
- 2016: Willingness
- 2017: Perspective
- 2018: Contribution
- 2019: Commitment
- 2020: Humility
- 2021: Resilience
- 2022: ?

As I review my collection of annual growth rings, the years are clearer and easier to recall and differentiate. They represent moments of clarity I experienced during the many hours of immersion spent in the profession to grasp complex ideas that were poorly understood in an early medical school lecture hall and impossible to absorb in a virtual classroom.

Approaching the end of my 20th year in practice and deep into a tiresome pandemic, my word choice is complicated. *Transformation* and *burnout* are unfortunately relevant themes. But, even in isolation, I manage to throw sawdust in the air and silently wonder about other family physicians' growth rings in our wonderful profession. And in the settling dust: *perseverance*. 🌿

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Competing interests

None declared

Reference

1. Higgins J. *Cod moratorium*. St John's, NL: Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage; 2009. Available from: <https://www.heritage.nf.ca/articles/economy/moratorium.php>. Accessed 2022 Jan 31.

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