

Bancroft doctor honoured with Rural Service Award



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By Nate Smelle

Since the Society of Rural Physicians of Canada was established in 1992, they have been the national voice of Canadian rural physicians, championing rural generalist medical care through education, collaboration, advocacy and research. On behalf of its members and the Canadian public, the society performs a wide variety of functions, such as: developing and advocating health delivery mechanisms; supporting rural doctors and communities in crisis; promoting and delivering continuing rural medical education; encouraging and facilitating research into rural health issues; and, fostering communication among rural physicians and other groups with an interest in rural health care.

Every year the SRPC celebrates the career and achievements of its most extraordinary members with its Rural Service Award. The award provides recognition for physicians who have lived and served in rural communities for 10 or more years. Earning the society's honour in 2020 as one of 14 recipients across the country was Dr, Steven Griffin of the Bancroft Family Health Team.

Growing up as a cottager in the area, Dr. Griffin has been establishing a connection with the community in North Hastings since he

was seven-years-old. When the opportunity to fill in for another doctor for a few months came up in 2008, he said he and his wife decided to change their routine and move to the area temporarily. Realizing how much they enjoyed living in Bancroft, Dr. Griffin said they decided to pack up their house in Kingston and make Bancroft their new home.

Having the opportunity to practice medicine in Bancroft for the past 12 years has been a great honour, Dr. Griffin said. During this time, he said there have been many challenges with practicing in a smaller rural community. However, for Dr. Griffin, the challenges he has faced have been a big part of what he has enjoyed most about practicing in Bancroft. One of these challenges, he said, has been recruiting family doctors to practice in the area.

'It's challenging for sure, but it's a rewarding place to practice,' said Dr. Griffin. 'Looking back over the past 12 years we have had the ongoing challenge of having enough family doctors in town. When I got here I was the first doctor to come in sometime oh, there had been no one for a couple years. Since I have been here in the last 12 years we have had five doctor's retire that were here when I started. But, we have been able to recruit eight doctors and six of them have stayed since then.'

For Dr. Griffin, one of the reasons he said Bancroft is such a great place to practice family medicine is because with the exception of delivering babies, a doctor gets to do almost everything they were trained to do. Another reason, he said, is the 'amazing' team of health care professionals he gets to work with.

'It's a great community to practice in, in terms of the medical community,' Dr. Griffin said. 'We have a great hospital that is very supportive. There are great nurses to work with, and the group I work with here at the family health team is fantastic as well. I just really enjoy being in Bancroft, being up north out of the big city. Not having to drive to work is just fantastic.'

During the COVID-19 pandemic that team has really been put to the test, explained Dr. Griffin. Since they started to receive warning signs regarding the severity of the crisis in early March, he said the medical community has been under a lot of stress doing everything possible to ensure the public's safety.

'We didn't know if we were going to have enough masks or gloves to see people. We were making all these plans and we had to do renovations at the hospital,' said Dr. Griffin. 'We didn't shut our office down, but essentially we had to stop seeing people unless it was a real emergency. So, practicing at the hospital became very quiet, people stopped coming to the hospital in March and April. It is starting to pick up now a bit with more activities, but we always felt like we were on the cusp of some great emergency or crisis, and it never materialized. We were kind of walking on egg shells for a couple of months.'

Despite the challenges the health-care community has faced and continues to face as a result of the the crisis, Dr. Griffin believes there will be some 'big benefits' in terms of practicing medicine to arise from the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, because the family health team has had to reduce the number of in-person visits with patients, he said they are making improvements in terms of tele-medicine. Explaining how he sees this as a step forward for the local health-care system, Dr. Griffin said he has been exploring video visits with patients since just before the pandemic hit.

Describing some of the challenges with tele-medicine he has observed, he added 'The big barrier up here has been that a lot of people don't have very good internet or cell phone coverage. So we are learning how to try and do medicine over video, which has its own unique challenges. It can be actually quite rewarding and the patient doesn't have to travel to see me and leave the safety of their own home or workplace' a lot of doctors have been pushing for these changes for tele-medicine, and there were just some conservative aspects that were like 'you can't do medicine this way, it's not safe.' There are aspects that we have to change and be very careful with, but I think it is going to have long-lasting benefits in that tele-medical will be much more accessible to patients in Ontario and I think most of Canada from now on. I don't think we are going to go backwards on this.'

Reflecting on what made him choose a career in medicine, Dr. Griffin said he liked science and wanted to get into a field where he could help people, so medicine seemed like a 'natural path.' After briefly exploring a career in evolutionary biology, he knew that he wanted to become a doctor. Offering advice to anyone interested in pursuing a career in medicine, Dr. Griffin said 'If you want to get into medicine you have to study hard and you have to work hard, but medicine thrives when you have people from diverse

backgrounds get into it. You don't necessarily have to major in biology to be a doctor. I have met great doctors who are teachers, musicians, one was an architect ? there are all sorts of different pathways to get here. You need good grades, you need to work hard, but if you think it is something you want to do it is a very rewarding career and there are a lot of pathways to get into it.?