



Put out the welcome mat for locums

For many years the recruitment and retention of physicians has been a growing problem in rural areas. In BC it appears to have reached crisis proportions.

Three articles in the Feb. 10 issue of *CMAJ* indicate that the problem is intensifying. "A warm place to practise: meeting the challenges of medicine in the North" (*CMAJ* 1998; 158[3]:337-8), by Dr. Allon Reddoch, is an enthusiastic, first-person testimonial. "Alberta's Rural Physician Action Plan: an integrated approach to education, recruitment and retention" (*CMAJ* 1998;158[3]:351-5), by Dr. Douglas Wilson and colleagues, is impeccably researched and concisely written, which reflects its academic origins. "Desperately seeking doctors" (*CMAJ* 1998;158[3]:377-8), by Barbara Sibbald, is equally cogent.

Having made a hobby of doing rural locums while in urban practice and having done many more since my "retirement" 11 years ago, I was struck that these articles did not mention living accommodations or the other services that locums need.

In one town I was given a pager by the office staff, but no charger or spare

batteries. I had no means of knowing that the instrument would give out in the middle of the night. Although I took the precaution of leaving the name of my motel with hospital staff, I was still censured for failing to answer a 3 am emergency room call. I had to drive 80 km and back a while later to receive a reprimand from the chief of staff, who was merely doing his job — the records had to be neat and tidy for accreditation purposes.

Occasionally the doctor being relieved is kind enough to provide sleeping accommodations, but on at least 2 of my jobs the rooms had no windows. Once I had to go through the master bedroom to get to the facilities — while the doctor and his wife were still at home. The alternative was to step out the back door, but one can't always see the cowpats!

As a rule, the accommodations are clean and comfortable in church-run hospitals, such as those of the United Church at Hazelton, Bella Bella and Bella Coola in BC. They are among the very few that encourage the spouse to accompany the locum, an arrangement that often allows for an enjoyable working holiday.

For many years I felt sorry for rural doctors who could not attract visiting locums, but at the moment I

feel that the rural communities themselves, and especially the medical groups, do not do enough to make visiting physicians welcome. If it were not for the kind physicians and their families who do so, the problems would be a lot worse.

Adam C. Waldie, MD

Former Head
Department of Family Practice
University Hospital
Vancouver, BC

Physician workload: the rural perspective

The article "Needs-based planning: the case of Manitoba" (*CMAJ* 1997;157[9]:1215-21), by Dr. Noralou P. Roos and colleagues, suggests an interesting alternative to doctor-patient population ratios in determining requirements for physician supply. It fails, however, to recognize rural medicine as a distinct discipline and makes unwarranted assumptions about the interchangeability of rural and urban family physicians.

The first problem concerns use of the ambulatory visit, defined as a visit to an office, walk-in clinic, home or emergency department, as a unit of

Submitting letters

Letters must be submitted by mail, courier or email, not by fax. They must be signed by all authors and limited to 300 words in length. Letters that refer to articles must be received within 2 months of the publication of the article. *CMAJ* corresponds only with the authors of accepted letters. Letters are subject to editing and abridgement.

Note to email users

Email should be addressed to pubs@cma.ca and should indicate "Letter to the editor of *CMAJ*" in the subject line. A signed copy must be sent subsequently to *CMAJ* by fax or regular mail. Accepted letters sent by email appear in the Readers' Forum of *CMA Online* (www.cma.ca) promptly, as well as being published in a subsequent issue of the journal.

Pour écrire à la rédaction

Prière de faire parvenir vos lettres par la poste, par messenger ou par courrier électronique, et non par télécopieur. Chaque lettre doit porter la signature de tous ses auteurs et avoir au maximum 300 mots. Les lettres se rapportant à un article doivent nous parvenir dans les 2 mois de la publication de l'article en question. Le *JAMC* ne correspond qu'avec les auteurs des lettres acceptées pour publication. Les lettres acceptées seront révisées et pourront être raccourcies.

Aux usagers du courrier électronique

Les messages électroniques doivent être envoyés à l'adresse pubs@cma.ca. Veuillez écrire «Lettre à la rédaction du *JAMC*» à la ligne «Subject». Il faut envoyer ensuite, par télécopieur ou par la poste, une lettre signée pour confirmer le message électronique. Une fois une lettre reçue par courrier électronique acceptée pour publication, elle paraîtra dans la chronique «Tribune des lecteurs du *JAMC*» d'*AMC En direct* (www.cma.ca) tout de suite, ainsi que dans un numéro prochain du journal.