



graduate-training program. . . . Some see it as a tragedy, but if it is, it is a tragedy without a villain." I submit that those who have tightened the purse strings without consideration of the ensuing hardships are potential candidates for that label.

Robertson later states, regarding physicians who chose to practise before entering a specialty, that "today that option does not exist, and those who were in practice before the system changed have found that most training posts are reserved for new graduates. Finding a retraining position in another specialty is difficult, if not impossible." I assume that Robertson knows that no positions are available in Canada and that she is referring to those of us who have left our native land, family and friends, and have moved to the US.

It is intolerable that we have allowed this situation to develop. I hope that the motion passed at the CMA's 1996 annual meeting — that "the CMA should convene a national meeting to address the crisis in post-graduate medical education" — is not forgotten, and that physicians make this issue a priority. Special thanks to the British Columbia Medical Association for this long overdue motion.

Can we finally change the system?

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Dauphinee and Thurber acknowledge that major changes have occurred in "physician-resource policies and medical-licensing requirements in Canada." It is also true that "discussions and decisions based on valid facts" are critically important. Unfortunately, their "facts" related to re-entry positions are grossly misleading. Currently, few re-entry positions are available in Canada. A

recent national meeting noted that only 7 unlimited re-entry positions were available in Canada (1 in BC, 2 in Newfoundland and 4 in Nova Scotia). Ontario has 24 re-entry positions with "return-of-service" clauses. Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and Quebec have no formal re-entry positions. Some 1-year positions are available for GP/FPs, and other re-entry positions become available when residency positions go unmatched. The current limited number of positions available should be cause for concern, particularly in a province such as Manitoba, where 20% of specialists have taken the re-entry route.

Medical students are forced to decide which aspect of medicine to pursue far too early in their training. Who wants to be cared for by an uninterested or depressed physician or surgeon? Why is it so difficult to attract Canadian graduates to rural medicine? Is it possible that trainees think rural or remote practice will lock them out of the cities or specialties for the rest of their lives? Easy access to re-entry positions for GP/FPs who choose to practise and learn more about medicine and themselves in a rural or remote setting may help correct our physician distribution problems. The time I spent as a "country doc" before turning to specialty training benefited me, my patients and my communities, past and present. It gave me a view of medicine from beyond the "ivory tower," and I would urge the Medical Council of Canada and the Canadian Post-MD Education Registry, training programs and credentialing bodies to share it.

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I was pleased to see the 2 articles on residency positions in Canada. We are now witnessing a failed experiment in medical education. Every clinician and student I have talked to feels that the loss of the rotating internship has been detrimental. Rather than having a common year of training for physicians who will become GPs or specialists, medical students must now make a forced and irrevocable choice during their third year in medical school. In many cases they have to make a lasting commitment to a clinical specialty before they have even experienced it.

I disagree with Dauphinee and Thurber's statement that "future demands for these [re-entry] positions will decrease since all of today's graduates will have completed their specialty training before being licensed." In fact, the opposite is true. Many physicians are uncertain about their future specialty training. Because of this, many have gone into general or family practice to experience real-life practice. After 3 to 5 years they may, sensibly, make a choice for further specialty training. Currently, these physicians are completely locked out of the system. In retrospect, the error was that additional demands were placed on the system — a second year of training for all family practice trainees — without any commitment from government to supply additional training positions.

I was surprised to read that Sandra Banner believes there is flexibility in the system and that more than 200 successful switches were made from one training program to another in 1996. This has certainly not been the case in BC.

It is distressing to learn that the College of Family Physicians of Canada is now "allowing additional training for extended roles in family medicine." This is well and good, but, unless additional positions are available, it will worsen existing problems.



As directed by General Council, the CMA is hosting a conference on the crisis in postgraduate medical education, and I believe some consensus will emerge. Still, the training system in place today is inferior to the one I trained in 20 years ago. We need to reinstate the rotating internship and lobby to have additional training positions so there is some flexibility in the system. There is an acute need for more re-entry positions, and we certainly should not add any more training requirements without a firm commitment for additional training spots. All CMA members should lobby our national medical associations so that a solution can be developed quickly.

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The size and makeup of the postgraduate training system is determined by 3 main factors: the number of training positions, the number of entrants and the training ratio of family physicians to specialists. The number of training positions must respond to the other 2 factors, rather than being the fixed or primary determinant. As Dauphinee and Thurber note, changes in the training (practice) ratio have a significant impact on the number of postgraduate positions required.

The formal education continuum begins with entry into medical school and ends with licensure and entry into practice. It is not productive, or, arguably, morally justified, to deny undergraduates an opportunity to move into the postgraduate component and, eventually, medical practice.

Provincial ministries of health are concerned about the immediate cost of the postgraduate positions they fund and look to further reductions to save money. They will need to provide, at a minimum, financial sup-

port for the postgraduate training of graduates of Canadian medical schools if they want to ensure that the medical education continuum is realized for both individuals and society. Some argue against graduates of Canadian schools being guaranteed postgraduate training in Canada; graduates of other professional schools enjoy no such guarantee. This argument denies the reality of the medical education continuum, artificially splits it into the undergraduate and postgraduate phases and overlooks the fact that medical graduates cannot be licensed and enter practice without a prescribed period of postgraduate training, available only through accredited educational programs that are funded mainly by government. Therefore, if governments continue to regulate and fund postgraduate medical education, they must also preserve the integrity of the education continuum and provide sufficient flexibility to permit extra preparation for academic careers, rural and remote practice, remediation and re-entry of practising physicians.

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I continue to be appalled that medical students must decide what postgraduate program they are going to pursue around the end of their second undergraduate year. In many cases this is almost impossible because their experience and exposure to medicine are far too limited. It is even sadder that once a course of action has been chosen, the young physician's future is written in stone.

I am eager to enter this fray because of the article "Little room for error in Canada's postgraduate training system" by Sandy Robertson. I was invited to train in surgery because the late Angus D. McLachlin

caught me working on a public surgical ward as a junior intern. Of course, that latter post no longer exists. My happy 35 years doing pediatric surgery could not have happened under present rules and conditions.

The junior internship year was the most valuable year of my medical life. According to Robertson, this training year was abolished by the demands of the College of Family Physicians of Canada. It is serious and very sad that only rarely can physicians change their course of action, although it appears that some have made career changes. As well, some provinces are trying to improve things. A Mar. 3, 1997, bulletin from the Ontario Ministry of Health¹ refers to re-entry opportunities for 10 Ontario general/family physicians, who will be able to pursue advanced skills in emergency medicine, anesthesia or geriatrics. There are also 15 re-entry specialty positions available in general surgery, obstetrics, general internal medicine and psychiatry. The snag — and of course there is one — is that these people must return to practice in an underserved area. This is to start July 1, 1997.

If deans of medicine would consider this problem, perhaps changes could be made. A few days ago, an internist told me he has never before seen the high level of anxiety found in today's medical students. The demand that they make too early a career choice is a big factor in this.

I hope that this article will be read, thought about and acted upon for the good of our medical students and future trainees.

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Reference

1. Ontario Ministry of Health. Re-entry opportunities for Ontario general/family physicians [letter]. Ontario: The Ministry; 1997.