

## Emergency MD becomes CMAJ's fifth editorial fellow

If there ever was a 21st-century Renaissance man-in-training, it is CMAJ's new editorial fellow. Dr. James Maskalyk is a former sawmill worker, professional shoplifter and courier who is now a part-time DJ, writer, marathon runner and breakdance wannabe with an abiding interest in global health. And, oh yes, he practises emergency medicine.

Now, at age 29, Maskalyk is adding something to his repertoire by taking a year off from his residency in Toronto to become involved in all aspects of producing CMAJ.

It's a natural enough progression, given that Maskalyk's first academic love was English — until his high school counsellor pushed him toward medicine. In becoming a doctor, Maskalyk also became the first member of his family to graduate from university. His parents own a lumber-planing business near Edmonton, where he and his younger brother Dan worked as kids. In 1995 he earned a degree in physiology at the University of Alberta, where his research won a Heritage Medical Research Award. He then spent a year earning cash as a truck courier. "I've never been worse at a job," he says.

Conversely, his 3 years at the University of Calgary medical school were "some of the best of my life." His most memorable part-time job during that period involved shoplifting from a health food store to test its security. Then, between first and second year, he garnered a bursary to do a medical elective in Santiago, Chile, where he worked with a cardiologist in the public health care system and helped victims of a flash flood.

The trip was a life-changing experience. "I realized that mine was only one of 6 billion stories. And I became interested in global health."

It also helped him decide on emergency medicine, a specialization that would give him a broad, easily portable skill set. "You can work somewhere for a while, then work abroad without leaving your patients in the lurch."

He has also been involved in researching the possible relationship between antibiotics and inflammatory

bowel disease. Those trials at the University of Calgary involved 40 rats, who gradually became terrified of Maskalyk. "They'd smell me coming down the hall and they'd start squealing," he says. "It was nasty."

At medical school, Maskalyk also volunteered at a homeless shelter that offered everything from food to free "rigs" (needles) for drug users. The work was "the best and worst part of each week," he says; it raised his social consciousness and also helped him conclude that "if you accept the weight of the world, you will fail."

During his residency, his interest in international health helped him obtain a scholarship to work in Cambodia. He and a translator worked out of a Land Cruiser, offering medical clinics in the morning and home visits in the afternoon. He also assessed the health care infrastructure and met with village elders to understand barriers to health.

Returning to Toronto, he became interested in seeing if a program in Cambodia could be sustainable. With help from the University of Toronto's Centre for International Health and the Office of International Surgery, a medical student and a staff emergency physician have gone to the same valley. Plans are being made to return later this year to strengthen relationships with the Ministry of Health and form a partnership with Cambodia's medical school. Maskalyk hopes that, if it is successful, the project might instill a sense of global responsibility that residents and students carry throughout their careers and lives. On a similar note, last year he helped found Residents for Global Health, which sponsors discussion forums and guest speakers in Toronto.

Midway through his residency, Maskalyk was accepted into Harvard's master's program in public health, but declined the offer. Instead, he accepted the editorial fellow position at CMAJ, largely to strengthen his writing skills. "One of the reasons we have problems understanding people ... is that we don't have their perspective. Through writing, there's the potential to pull people into another part of the world. If you



Dr. James Maskalyk, in the house (the album he's holding is *Fat Jon the Ample Soul Physician*)

can do that well enough and effect large changes, you can help more than you can stomping out malaria one case at a time." He plans to pursue a master's degree in public health later in his career.

His writing has already been published in CMAJ ([www.cmaj.ca/cgi/content/full/165/12/1597](http://www.cmaj.ca/cgi/content/full/165/12/1597)) and the *Globe and Mail*; he has also delivered commentaries on the CBC (most recently on raves) and published short fiction.

His focus on medicine and international health has forced him to forgo at least one of his other aspirations: to be a B-boy — an expert in breakdancing. He compensates by combing dusty bins, collecting old hip hop vinyl.

Currently, he is in the midst of training for his second marathon; he runs an average of 65 km a week.

In the end, the conversation returns to medicine. "My focus for the next while is making my time at CMAJ a success, and becoming a good emergency doctor. It looks like I might have to save B-boying for retirement." — Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ

Applications for the 2003 fellowship are invited [see [www.cmaj.ca/misc/fellowship.shtml](http://www.cmaj.ca/misc/fellowship.shtml)]. The deadline is Dec. 16, 2002.)