

Preparing internationally trained doctors for BC's north

Physicians are not easy to come by for patients living in British Columbia's north, but a new program hopes to improve the status quo.

Remote northern communities recently welcomed six graduates of the Practice Ready Assessment BC program. The program, which had 11 graduates in March, puts internationally trained doctors through a 12-week evaluation with a BC physician. Upon completion, graduates are sent to communities in need of doctors.

Dr. Joseph Obanye was living in Crawley, England, when he heard about the program from a former university classmate who kept telling him he needed to come to Canada. Other participants in the program came from Egypt, Pakistan, Iraq, Nigeria and Ireland.

"Initially I had declined because I knew there was so much red tape and hoops that you had to get over before you start working in Canada. He told me about the Practice Ready Assessment, which sort of takes all of that away, so it's a lot easier," said Obanye.

The program's requirements include English proficiency and at least 960 hours of work in family medicine, as well as a minimum of four weeks of postgraduate training in pediatrics, general or internal medicine, obstetrics and gynecology, psychiatry and emergency medicine.

For his three-month assessment, Obanye went to Valemount, a village with a small community health centre and just over 1000 people, nestled in the cragged Canadian Rockies.

"It was challenging in the sense that the resources were quite limited, and when there was anything serious, like somebody with a heart attack, we'd need to either have the person flown out or for an ambulance to drive three to four hours away," he said.

The closest major medical centre is a three-hour drive north to Prince George. Obanye said he learned what life was like for a patient in rural Canada when some of the people he saw had to travel one-and-a-half hours to have an ultrasound in Jasper.

Despite the lack of amenities, Obanye wanted to stay in Valemount's welcoming community, but he had to move on. Through the program, he was given a list of cities in need of physicians. He picked three at random and ended up in Quesnel, a northern city with 10 000 residents that is a 1-hour-and-20-minute drive from Prince George.

After passing the assessment process, he took the standard exams organized through the University of British Columbia and the College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia. The only costs to Obanye, other than his moving expenses and arranging for his wife to join him in Canada, were the college registration, licence fees and for the Medical Council of Canada to have his documents verified.

The program has \$7.6 million in funding from the Joint Standing Committee on Rural Issues, a combined effort between the ministry of health and Doctors of BC. The program is funded until March 2018, and another



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Northern BC communities in need of doctors, such as Valemount, are benefiting from a new program that prepares internationally trained physicians for practice in Canada.

15 internationally trained physicians will be assessed in the spring and fall of this year. The program's first wave of 14 physicians began work in July 2015.

Another key aspect of the program is that the internationally trained physician has to stay a minimum of three years in the remote community.

"This program not only ensures that qualified international doctors are working in rural areas where they are most needed, but the three-year return

of service also provides stable access to care for patients," said Dr. Charles Webb, president of Doctors of BC.

Obanye is happy with his placement in Quesnel but he admits the lifestyle may not be for everyone. He listed several reasons why people may not want to stay in a remote community, including the isolation, trouble adapting to the culture and the long, cold, snowy winters.

In the warmer yet rainier climate of Prince Rupert, an eight-hour drive from

Prince George, one physician was added to the roster from the Practice Ready program. The Member of Legislative Assembly for the region, Jennifer Rice, welcomed the news.

"Estimates suggest there are hundreds of thousands of British Columbians left waiting in walk-in clinics because they don't have a family doctor," said Rice. — Shannon Lough, Prince Rupert, BC

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