

CODA



“I didn’t know I needed a poet”

Monica Kidd MD

■ Cite as: *CMAJ* 2017 August 14;189:E1053.
doi: 10.1503/cmaj.170802

Dr. Monica Kidd has written two novels and three volumes of poetry; she’s followed seabirds from Newfoundland and Labrador to the Antarctic. She worked her way up to being the CBC’s national science journalist, and then went to medical school. These days, she’s a mother and family doctor in Calgary. She’s never stopped writing. If you’re curious about her unusual career, you can read a profile about Kidd in the Jan. 9, 2017, issue. We hope you enjoy Coda and, as always, we welcome your feedback.

I recently said goodbye to a clinic I had been at for five years. It was an odd experience, because during my family medicine training in Newfoundland and Labrador I aspired to deliver babies of babies I’d delivered. (Though my mentor would have slapped my wrists just then, saying, “You don’t deliver babies, Monica; your patients deliver babies.”) Why did I leave my clinic in Alberta? Just a desire for change.

But it did mean I had to say goodbye to the 250-or-so patients assigned to me. Arrangements had been made for all

of them to see other physicians in my clinic, so they wouldn’t be without care. And personally, as much as I love

my own family doctor, if he told me he was closing up shop, I wouldn’t hold it against him. (Though don’t get any ideas, Mike. I promise I’ll bring in the kids for a healthy child check one of these days.) Still, I lost sleep over telling my patients I was leaving. Would they feel abandoned? Was I being selfish? I wrote them all letters, and signed them. To some, I wrote individual notes; others I called to tell that a letter would be coming in the mail with the details.

I’m not sure what I was expecting, but I was prepared for anger. Instead, some people shrugged and lots said they would miss me, but wished me all the best with my new work. This is Calgary, after all; until the most recent bust, people in this boomtown seemed to change jobs more frequently than they painted their kitchens.

One family, though, I hadn’t heard back from. I’d called a couple of times, sent a letter, and ... crickets. I had walked with them through some terrible crises, and had done more of the mom’s care by phone than many of my colleagues would be comfortable with. But I did it because she has difficulties coming to hospital. I worried the family was upset with me about leaving. I worried they were in crisis and felt they couldn’t reach out.

Then, on my second-last clinic day, all four of them came. When I was done with the dad and the kids, the mom, whom I’ll

call Lisa, handed me a letter. It was a single sheet, printed on fancy paper with a floral border. She gave me permission to share with you part of what she wrote: “You sat with me in my grief and sadness. You made me feel less ashamed. You made it easier to be a good mom. I didn’t know that I needed a poet; a philosopher who could prescribe [iron], but that’s what you were, and I am so glad.” The mascara massacre that followed — mine — was not pretty.

Unless they’ve Googled me, my patients typically don’t know I’m a writer, much less a poet. Given the typical response to poetry (I once heard a very depressing statistic about the number of Canadians who had read a book of poetry in the previous year), I have found it’s better not to disclose this in mixed company. Lisa knew.

I’ve spent a lot of time looking up “evidence” for how the humanities enrich medical curricula, or make better doctors, or reduce HbA_{1c} levels. I’ve spent probably far too much time looking for the silver bullet that will allow me to run writing groups with medical students and residents on company time, and have natural light and original art on the wall everywhere I work, and break for tea with the artist-in-residence. So far I’ve had to make do with an hour here and there, usually extracurricular, while commiserating with other humanities types about how the world needs more humanities. Perhaps as I write, I am guilty of being a hammer, seeing everything as a nail, but I feel intuitively that at least the receiving part of writing, encouraging someone to tell their story, sharing in it, bearing witness, is a therapeutic act.

As far as medicine goes, I’m as good as my peers, and I try to improve. I don’t think being a poet makes me a superstar, and I honestly don’t know how it affects my approach to patients. Whatever it is probably irritates as many people as it doesn’t. But there are some patients — people — who need it. Lisa’s letter was all the evidence I need. And it was probably the best parting gift I’ll ever receive.