

see a 25-day-old infant who was in respiratory arrest. It was snowing so hard I could barely see the road, and the usual 1-hour trip took double that. I get ribbed from the local helicopter pilot about overloading with all my medical “junk,” but in that case, I was very grateful that I had brought a 3.5 ETT and a neonatal-sized BVM and mask.

It is amazing how much stuff I use with just one sick patient. Restocking isn't easy—everything has to be ordered from town and shipped out. Drugs go out of date quickly, and I then find myself out on a call needing the one drug I don't have.

Usually the trip into town in the ambulance goes quickly because I'm busy. The trip home is often at 4 a.m. and, for me, the 3-hour trip drags on because I can't sleep. Although Highway 20 is paved, the frost heaves make for a lot of motion, and in the confines of the ambulance box, nausea is a constant partner. The nurse and I take turns bringing water and granola bars to fuel ourselves.

E-mailing Antarctica

Just as my discovery of the Tatlayoko Valley was a twist of fate, so too was my connection to Dr Rob Coetzee, my soon-to-be replacement.

I was at the office of my family doctor, who just happened to be the president of the local medical staff and involved with recruiting new physicians to Williams Lake. Just that morning he had been communicating with a potential recruit who had turned down the offer, claiming that “Williams Lake was too big.” I obtained the candidate's e-mail address and after sending Dr Coetzee a note, received a quick reply from Antarctica where he was at the start of a 1-year sojourn as team doctor at the South African research station.

Unfortunately we were unable to speak on the phone, but the research station has access to a slow Internet

connection which allowed e-mail and picture downloading.

I quickly discovered that Rob was an avid fly fisherman and had been dreaming of living and working in British Columbia for a number of years. This was no doubt due to glowing reports from his compatriots who had already transplanted themselves to this faraway land.

I proceeded to flood his mailbox with a slew of photos that highlighted the natural beauty of the Coast Mountains and Chilcotin plateau. Within days the hook was set deep, and there was no escaping—Dr Rob was coming to Tatla Lake, and he'd never even been to Canada!

I did my best to be honest about the difficulties associated with living and working in an underserved area with no backup and diagnostic capabilities, but he was undeterred. His 10 years of experience as an ALS paramedic prior to medical school would no doubt serve him well, and in addition, his anesthetic and emergency background made him a perfect fit.

Passing the torch

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Although I am retiring, it will be with mixed emotions. It is satisfying to know that the foundation laid by establishing a practice in this remote area will be a stepping stone for a new physician who is an adventurer at heart. I can only hope that he will obtain the same fulfillment from the challenges and rewards that I have.

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—Karen MacDonell
Director, Library Services

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