

Valuing time and care

Morale of the average family physician of the longitudinal full-service variety is at a very low level in our province. In fact, fatigue from the pandemic, demands from stressed patients, increased paperwork, and rising overhead costs are all factors causing *many* BC physicians' morale to drop, not only full-service longitudinal-care family physicians. These physicians are crying foul at the stagnation in their take-home pay relative to other physicians, other health care providers, and other occupations.

I don't begrudge my hardworking colleagues who are earning more than I am, and I certainly don't want to divide our profession. At present, there is no incentive for family physicians to work in a practice that provides full-service longitudinal care. First, we are not trained in medical school to run a small business. Second, overhead costs are rising at a much faster rate than our fee schedule. This point is very important, I believe, and applies to all physicians running their own offices.

A number of years ago, Doctors of BC (then the BCMA), set an hourly rate (currently \$160) intended to compensate family physicians for the work they did outside of their practice—for example, committee work for the association. This rate is now used as a guideline for contracts with family physicians working as hospitalists or in urgent and primary care clinics. What seems to have been forgotten is that the hourly rate was originally designed to include an amount for office overhead costs, based on the premise that our office overhead continues whether we are in our offices or not. I am not suggesting that hospitalists be paid less. My hospitalist colleagues work hard and deserve every penny they earn. What I am suggesting is that the puny Business Cost Premium does not even come close to compensating us for the added costs of running an office

practice, over and above what family physicians who don't have business costs earn.

Newly qualified family physicians are voting with their feet. Very few are heading into office-based practices with overhead. Family physicians with years of experience are doing likewise by working less or shutting down their offices in favor of retirement or other work—for example, as hospitalists or as urgent and primary care clinic physicians. As a result, the number of unattached patients is growing steadily. It's ironic that urgent and primary care clinics were meant to be the government's solution to the growing number of unattached patients.

As Doctors of BC and the BC government negotiate a new Physician Master Agreement, they need to come up with creative ways of compensating physicians who own and work in their practices, which differentiates them from physicians who don't pay business costs. This compensation should not be available to medical clinic owners who do not work as physicians in those clinics, and it should reward full-service longitudinal family physicians fairly, relative to their colleagues who provide episodic care, those who don't operate small businesses, and those who offer only virtual care.

Ultimately, it comes down to what each person at the negotiating table wants from their family physician. What I want from my family physician is someone who has the time to get to know me and care about me, and someone who is not stressed by having to run their own practice with rising business costs and increasing intensity of their work.

I can't write such a gloomy editorial without throwing in a small piece of humanity. I was standing in a long line at the bank recently, when an elderly lady holding a cane took her place behind me in the line. I offered to let her go ahead of me. She was quite feisty and asked

me why I thought that she deserved to go ahead of me in line. I told her it was because she was holding a cane. Her response, with a cheeky grin, was that she was just holding it, and that she didn't need to use it. She eventually took me up on my offer and moved ahead of me.

A few minutes later, a very frail-looking elderly lady with a cane joined the line. She could barely stand and was leaning heavily on her cane and the railing. I assisted her to the front of the line and into the bank, where a bank employee found her a chair. As I walked back to my place in line, the first lady I had helped remarked that there was always someone worse off than oneself. Despite my sombre tone, I am always cognizant of the fact that there are many people worse off than I am. ■

—David Chapman, MBChB

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Attn: BC Doctors

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Carpe diem?

I am rethinking *carpe diem* (seize the day). We who have a career in medicine have a clear understanding of the long haul—planning years in advance the steps we need to take, where we need to be, who we need to find, and how long we will need to work before seeing the end of the tunnel. We knowingly walk our particular fork in the road, weary head down and eyes focused, miles before even the potential of seeing if the destination is as wonderful as we expect it to be.

Straying off the line, especially in competitive fields, may have led to questions about a lack of commitment or focus. There was always an exam to prepare for, a talk to attend, a procedure to learn, a teachable moment, a new rotation. When I finished my Royal College exams, I realized it was the first time since

high school that I didn't have my next month programmed for me.

If I'm recognizing it correctly, there is a decidedly different mood now. Many in my kids' generation realistically believe that the Earth as we know it may cease to exist within their lifetimes. They are not as interested in the long haul if it means sacrificing too much of the now. They will probably not be able to afford a house, and having a basic university degree may not give them enough career advantage to balance the incurred debt, both financial and temporal. Many don't drive. Many won't have kids. There is a highly subscribed-to Reddit site called FI/RE (Financial Independence/Retiring Early) where people look

for ways to *not* have long careers. What many appear to be doing differently from my generation is taking control of their paths in ways we had been programmed to think were short-sighted and only immediately gratifying.

The pandemic has been a big wake-up. We can now *really* see how little friggin' control we have, how vulnerable our pithy plans are. How a tiny particle that didn't exist 5 years ago can upend the world economy, our work, our political activity, our family structure, our *plans*. How even when being careful and vaccinated and masked people could die as a result of their short-term choices. The novel downtime we had for retrospection during the beginning of lockdown let us recognize that we hadn't sufficiently appreciated the time we had with our friends and families, that we should have taken that trip instead of working, that nurses deserve neighborhood applause, that live entertainment is in fact something special, that *now* contains so much short-term joy.

I am realizing that we studiously looked away so as to keep to our path. People and wonderful moments are truly fleeting, and we may even miss missing them if we don't look

up enough. Beyond the pandemic, there are accidents and diseases; beloved family members are lost to malignancy or sudden vascular events; a war breaks out somewhere in the world, and opportunities and lives are lost in the time it takes a missile to land.

We take for granted that we will one day enjoy all the little things again. I hope not to regret too much that all those little things may no longer be there to enjoy.

I used to think that *carpe diem* was a kind of admonishment for us to not waste time off our path. To not procrastinate in striving for our goals. What I am being taught by my kids' generation and by this horrible viral particle is that what we should

seize might be more *off* the path than on it.

Maybe our kids are better at balancing what they are willing to invest and recognize that nihilism is okay during a time of no control and perhaps no guaranteed future. The minutes spent sleeping in, cuddling with a partner or a pet, or lounging with friends doing absolutely nothing might be the best parts of the day to seize.

There is a corollary aphorism that counsels *carpe omnia*. Seize it all. Be present in everything. Find joy and relationships in all parts of life. Don't wait until your ducks are in a row. I don't know if I would have had the courage to live that way when I was young and focused on "getting there," but I am definitely more sympathetic to millennials looking off the path that we followed.

Be kind to yourself, present and future. *Carpe omnia*. ■

—Cynthia Verchere, MD

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