



Dr Michael Schwandt

A public health perspective on the *BCMJ* Editorial Board

By Tara Lyon

The *BCMJ* recently welcomed a new Editorial Board member, Dr Michael Schwandt—a specialist in public health and preventive medicine. Dr Schwandt serves as a medical health officer with Vancouver Coastal Health and a clinical associate professor in the UBC School of Population and Public Health, and he brings his public health expertise to reviewing and selecting articles for publication in the *BCMJ*.

Dr Schwandt, born and raised in Winnipeg, came by his fascination with science and medicine at a younger age than most. “When I was quite young, but old enough to understand, my dad had a cerebral aneurysm that required emergency brain surgery, and that exposed me in a very personal way to the impact of quality health services to individuals and families—it exposed me to medicine in a very positive

way.” He describes Winnipeg as a great city to grow up in. “It’s so far from other urban centres,” he explains, “and as a result, it’s a unique community with its own distinct local scene—it’s a great place for music, art, and theatre. For a city of its size, there’s a lot more to be exposed to than one might expect.” It was the University of Manitoba’s focus on public health topics that set him on his ultimate career path, he says. “That unique exposure ended up being what pointed me toward my long-term career.”

Dr Schwandt describes himself as a life-long avid reader whose interests eventually expanded to media and communications. He worked with UBC’s student newsletter, the *Ubyyssey*, during his undergrad degree and volunteered at the campus student radio station. “I’ve always been interested in learning about ways to disseminate good information,” he explains. When his undergrad and medical training were behind him, he started making more time for reading, both personally and professionally. “In terms of personal reading, I find myself reading a lot

of near future dystopian fiction—pandemics, climate change,” he says. “I like to look at negative and positive pathways for the near future. It’s a rich vein of reading for pleasure and reflection.”

When COVID-19 arrived in early 2020, Dr Schwandt’s interests in public health, pandemic scenarios, and dissemination of information converged. “Like all health care providers in a pandemic situation, we want to apply our training to the utmost ability. When the pandemic hit, we understood that it would bring to bear issues like contact tracing, the kinds of health communications that public health physicians are trained in, as well as testing, vaccination, etc.—these activities are all essential to public health practice. They all came to a peak at once, and we all found ourselves working with all the fundamentals. But the nonstop and prolonged nature of it was not something that people anticipated, and that it would be so immersive.”

Dr Schwandt says that there were many insights to be found in the way public health communications unfolded in the pandemic. “I was heartened by the broad uptake of the public health messages that were being disseminated, but, like everyone, I was disheartened by the spread of misinformation. If one person said the vaccine didn’t work, loudly, it got a lot of traction.” In future, he says, “We’ll need to see real efforts to fill spaces with quality information to drown out misinformation.”

Dr Schwandt sees his role on the Editorial Board as an opportunity to advance his interest in dissemination of health information and promote public health measures at the provincial level. “I’ve seen the *BCMJ* do a good job of promoting public health topics,” he says, “and I hope to carry that on by making links from the clinical topics to the preventive side. When we have excellent articles on work being done at the community level, I think physicians are also interested in expanding those efforts to prevention on a broader scale. I hope I can bring that on board.”

Read Dr Schwandt’s first editorial in this issue. ■

Ms Lyon is a staff member of the BC Medical Journal.
