

Reflections of a rural family doctor

An approaching medical class reunion spurs reflections on 40 years of practice in a small coastal community in British Columbia.

Jim Petzold, MD

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the graduation of our medical school class of 1979. A few of our enthusiastic class members are planning a reunion, where we will gather to celebrate the occasion—a September weekend event that will likely include a few didactic presentations as well as some fun activities and social gatherings.

Dr Petzold is a soon-to-be-retired rural family physician. For 35 years he practised full-service family medicine, including emergency, anesthesia, and obstetrics, on BC's Sunshine Coast. Over the past 3 years he has been doing locums as part of the BC Rural Locum Program. He and his wife, Sharon, continue to enjoy life in the idyllic seaside community of Roberts Creek.

Much as I was looking forward to seeing friends and classmates from such a meaningful time in our lives, initially it was with a degree of trepidation. The trepidation was not due to the legitimate fear of failing to recognize the faces of some whom I have not seen for many years, or of concern that I had aged in appearance more than everyone else. No, my apprehension stemmed from how poorly my career in family medicine might stack up against those of my classmates.

You see, I have spent the past 40 years mostly in full-service rural family practice in a small coastal community of British Columbia. Unlike many of my classmates, I have not traveled extensively. I have not done



any volunteering in the developing world. I have not sat on multiple committees. I have not completed a specialty and then gone on to do amazing research with papers published in leading medical journals. I have not been the head of an academic faculty at a prestigious facility or a world-renowned speaker at medical forums.

Some of my former classmates have so many letters behind their names that I need a medical dictionary to figure out what most of them mean, while I can display only the lonely letters MD behind mine. I don't even have the now obligatory CCFP. Nope, just plain old MD.

In this self-abasing frame of mind, I began questioning whether I wanted to reunite with my now rich and famous former classmates. Then, while doing the weekly grocery shop on seniors' day in the local IGA, I experienced an epiphany of sorts. I heard an excited voice yell from down the aisle, "Doctor Petzold, Doctor Petzold!" I looked up to see a young woman approaching with her 5-year-old son in tow. She wanted her son to meet the doc who helped bring him into this world.

This got me reflecting on the countless meaningful interactions I have had with patients over the years. I thought of the thousand or so joyful births attended, but also the few stillbirths where only comfort and

compassion could be given. I thought of the hundreds of epidurals that brought relief to women in labor. I thought of the many nights on ER call as a solo doc attending to the next major trauma, airway emergency, MI, or overdose to come through the door. I thought of the all-night vigils in the homes of dying patients. I thought of sharing the unimaginable grief of parents losing a child to cancer. I thought of the elderly man watching his wife of 50 years suffer through the end stages of emphysema. I thought of the hundreds of medical students and residents whose careers in family medicine I have had the privilege of helping to shape, if only in some small way.

Above all, I thought of the many, many hugs shared over the years with patients and co-workers in times of joy and sorrow. I am grateful to have had the opportunity to share in some of the most meaningful events in so many people's lives. All in all, it's been a pretty good career for *just* a GP.

Now, as the class reunion draws near, I am once again excited to attend. As I and many of my former classmates approach retirement, I look forward to hearing about their careers in medicine, just as I look forward to sharing stories from mine. ■

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