

Nurse practitioner now seeing patients in Bancroft



By Tony Pearson

For nurse-practitioner Christine McDowell, practicing medicine in Bancroft has a number of advantages. She loves working as part of the patient-centred, full-service team at North Hastings Family Health community clinic, she loves the patients she works with and the style of client service, and she really loves the area.

Looking at her background suggests some other benefits to working in Bancroft. For example, there are no land mines on local roads, and she doesn't have to worry about rockets and grenades being fired at her clinic. Before becoming a nurse-practitioner, McDowell was a nurse in the Canadian Armed Forces, where she served three tours of duty in Afghanistan. Two of these were in Kandahar, an active battle zone, where she was on call 24 hours a day. Helicopters could arrive at any hour, bringing wounded soldiers requiring immediate attention - as she said, "Like the television show MASH, but with real trauma." If her camp was under attack, she had to get the wounded to shelter, or protect them with flak blankets. And this was done on days when the temperature regularly went over 40 degrees.

McDowell practiced another type of emergency medicine when she was posted to Pakistan as part of our Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) after a major and devastating earthquake. Among other relief work, she had to deliver babies on camp cots.

With this record, it is not surprising that McDowell was honoured with an award by the Canadian Nurses Federation in a 2007 ceremony at the Nursing Sisters Memorial on Parliament Hill.

After 14 years of military service, McDowell then looked for a fresh challenge, and decided to take her degree as a nurse-practitioner at Queen's University. A nurse-practitioner is very close in her scope of practice to a doctor. She can diagnose patients and prescribe treatments "everything a family practice physician can except for certain procedures like CAT scans, or "controlled substances" like narcotic drugs. She can even do certain surgical operations, like growth removals.

As to the "why" of becoming a nurse-practitioner within a family health team, McDowell states that this ensures her patients have access to the resources that they need. As well, she can work pro-actively to empower her clients to take control of their own health.

This is particularly true for clients with chronic conditions, such as diabetes, COPD, or a cardiac condition.

As a nurse-practitioner, McDowell can help her clients navigate the often confusing health care system in order to receive the resources and treatments they require. She can test, diagnose, prescribe, refer and follow-up with each of her patients. She notes that at North Hastings FHT, she can direct patients to chronic disease self-management groups which the clinic operates, and she can arrange appointments with visiting specialists, cutting the need to travel to treatment. She also noted the active diabetes education program at North Hastings as another pro-active contribution to preserving clients' health. "It's a pleasure to work with a dedicated team which covers the spectrum of care; it feels like a real family," she stated.

As for her locale, although she had never been to Bancroft before, she knew she would appreciate its quality of life, as she is originally from a similar small town in Newfoundland. She says that she has not been disappointed: "It's a real treat knowing your neighbours, and it's great to encounter nature right outside your window when you start your day."

She also enjoys her practice. "I really love my patients, and I love that I get to spend time with them, working out personalized health plans; it's a far cry from emergency-room medicine. I leave at the end of the day knowing that we're working together to provide the full range of what's needed."

As for overall community health, McDowell notes that while Bancroft's average age is above the provincial norm, it is great to see that a great many area seniors are living an active and healthy lifestyle. Meanwhile, she and her husband are looking forward to becoming ever more involved in the community. She has joined the quilters group, and hopes to get back to her pottery hobby as well; she has previously sold her work in aid of dog rescue. The environment is also wonderful for a runner, as she has been for many years. All in all, she expects a long and rewarding practice in North Hastings.