

*May 1 is National Physicians' Day.*

*In recognition, RhPAP would like to thank all the physicians who keep quality healthcare close to home for rural residents. This story features a rural doctor who endeavours to stay at the top of his game in the Brooks area by continually expanding his knowledge and expertise. He believes other rural physicians may be able to do the same with RhPAP's support.*



Dr. Du Toit Visser believes rural physicians play an important role in mentoring medical students and can influence their decision to practise rural. He discusses how point-of-care ultrasound can be used to speed up diagnosis with Daphne Nakhid, a medical student. Dr. Visser learned how to do the ultrasounds after an RhPAP-sponsored course.

— Photo supplied by Dr. Du Toit Visser

By investing his time in continuous training, Dr. Du Toit Visser has not only strengthened his own skills but also transformed the care he provides for his patients.

The South African-trained physician hasn't practised in Brooks for long, but during his two years in Canada, he has boosted his emergency medical skills, learned point-of-care ultrasound, and enhanced his surgical obstetrics with grants and other support from RhPAP.

"My career is really continuing to expand on a daily basis," Dr. Visser says. "It was so natural to incorporate the new skills into my daily practice."

RhPAP's Physician Skills Enrichment Grant (PSEG) and General Emergency Medicine Skills (GEMS) have provided him with online and onsite training. Dr. Visser insists his new skills regularly come into play during his day-to-day work.

Visser used the PSEG to train in rural ultrasound and enhanced surgical obstetrics. Being able to do ultrasounds on-the-spot has had multiple benefits including time and cost savings and provides vital information to the physician and patient without delay.

"I rarely walk around without an ultrasound machine because it's so interesting to continue to learn while working," he explains.

His enthusiasm for the investigative tool has rubbed off. Many of his colleagues in Brooks have signed up for ultrasound training as well.

The emergency medical training Dr. Visser learned through GEMS was so valuable the physician wishes he would have known about it when he first arrived in Canada after spending time practising in South Africa, Ireland, and the U.S. It was a great opportunity to familiarize himself with the Alberta healthcare system, he noted.

“I think they should really push for this for new physicians coming to work in [rural] emergency rooms (ERs). It was good foundational work for someone who is starting in ER.”

The Brooks Health Centre ER has since implemented an airway checklist that follows the same protocol used by STARS.

“We’re using the same jargon as STARS now, we’re using the same evidence-based techniques. I think it makes the nursing team feel comfortable, I feel more comfortable. They get this checklist out and everybody is just more prepared.”

Dr. Visser was also fortunate to learn some tricks of the obstetrics trade in nearby Medicine Hat where he shadowed Dr. John Jeffery and other physicians as they carried out caesarian sections and other surgeries. Building a rapport with the Medicine Hat team was also a huge benefit.



Nurse Anya Howard and Dr. Du Toit Visser discuss an airway procedure checklist used by STARS. The Brooks Health Centre emergency room now follows the same guidelines after Dr. Visser learned the protocol during General Emergency Medicine Skills (GEMS) training.

— Photo supplied by Dr. Du Toit Visser

“Now they can actually see that we’re not just another voice over the phone,” he says, referring to times when he will need to refer his patients to the site.

“It’s good for the specialists to see that we want to follow the evidence, expand our skills, and make sure that our community gets the best service possible from us.”

Combining training courses with a busy rural clinical practice sounds daunting, but Dr. Visser says it hasn’t been difficult.

RhPAP helped him remove barriers for learning by arranging accommodation as needed, providing some financial support, and coordinating the training.

“It gives physicians an opportunity to continue to learn and grow and not feel like we’re being left out compared to people who are closer to academic centres,” he says.

Dr. Visser is so pleased with the support he has received that he wants to give back. He knows the experience medical students receive both on and off the job has an impact on where they eventually set up practice.

Through RhPAP’s Rural Mentorship Program, he has mentored more than 16 medical students. The doctor is also preparing his property so he can work with RhPAP Accommodations to offer medical learners a place to stay while they study in Brooks.

“The onus is on us to be able to expand the rural culture and make a sustainable community for the future,” says Dr. Visser.

“That’s a small part in what we can play in this whole thing.”