

Two physicians from across the province are following the lead of a rural healthcare champion after receiving bursaries from RHPAP to cover their medical school costs.

Dr. James Welke, a Claresholm physician, and High Level-based Dr. Taylor Nelson were two of several medical students who received the Dr. John N. Hnatuik Rural Medical Student Bursary a decade ago.

The bursary was named in honour of former RHPAP skills broker, Dr. Hnatuik, who spent much of his career practising in the east-central community of Provost. Tuition and differential fees were covered for several students over a number of years for their four years of medical education.

“It really made it viable to go to med school,” recalls Dr. Welke, who returned to post-secondary school after working as a residential framer and doing other odd jobs.

“Financially, it was a very big load off my shoulders.”

Dr. Welke was inspired to consider medicine after regularly playing board games with several doctors and RCMP members in his home community of Pincher Creek.



Dr. James Welke, his wife, Joy, and son, Lore, live in Claresholm, where the physician is now chief of staff. Dr. Welke received the Dr. John N. Hnatuik Rural Medical Student Bursary to fund his medical

education.

— Photo supplied by Dr. James Welke

Today, he also serves as chief of staff in Claresholm after starting his practice in 2021. While his game time is limited due to his many roles including clinical lecturer for the University of Calgary, Dr. Welke occasionally brings out a board game for medical residents he mentors who stay in the community for a longer period.

“We usually have the (medical) resident over; they get a glass of wine, and then we try to roast them in a board game,” he says.

Dr. Welke has about 800 patients in his panel including residents from a couple of Hutterite colonies, people from a large farming/ranching area, as well as a large geriatric demographic.

Working rural keeps this doctor on his toes. It isn't always easy to make referrals or convince patients to travel to city specialists. Dr. Welke appreciates that he has access to specialist support by phone/video through Alberta Health Service's RAAPID (Referral, Access, Advice, Placement, Information & Destination) system.

“I had to do an emergency paracentesis on an infant a couple of weeks ago,” he says of the procedure involving a ruptured intestine which forced the patient to stop in Claresholm while travelling by ambulance from Lethbridge to Calgary.

“I had never done one before but I had the Alberta Children's Hospital on video chat guiding me through.”

Up north in High Level, Dr. Nelson is amazed how much busier the hospital seems today than when she first started practising.

“The community has grown a lot ... there's more demand for access to healthcare,” says Dr. Nelson, who grew up in the area.

She was intrigued by medicine after visiting the newly opened Northwest Health Centre as a high school student. Dr. Nelson originally wanted to be a nurse, but her plan evolved as she took part in job shadowing.

“I ended up deciding to become a physician as I had good grades,” she says. “The ability to have the freedom of practice that physicians have was a big draw in that you could kind of go above and beyond in some instances and really advocate to make change.”

Today, she lives on an acreage and enjoys dabbling in hobby farming between her shifts as a rural generalist.

“I’ve got horses, I’ve got cows. I decided to be a doctor and a farmer; the hours don’t line up very good for those two jobs,” she admits, chuckling.



It was always Dr. Taylor Nelson's plans to return to her home community of High Level after becoming a physician.

— Photo by Brielle Boles Photography

Rural practice was always in the back of her mind as she ventured off to school.

"My family has deep roots in the community so ... we have always come back here," says Dr. Nelson.

Offering care to Dene, Métis, and Cree peoples in the region was also appealing.

"Part of coming back to High Level was the opportunity to focus on Indigenous health and trying to bring something that wasn't always readily available to those communities.

"The opportunity to do outreach clinics and build a practice on that has been really rewarding."

While she enjoys having family and friends close by, Dr. Nelson was grateful that RhPAP provided housing when she returned to High Level for 10 months for her Rural Integrated Community Clerkship Program during her third year in medicine. She also completed rotations in Sundre and Peace River with RHPAP accommodation support.

Her choice to return to High Level has been worthwhile.

"You see familiar faces that you saw at work or have looked after before" or at events in the community, she says.

"It's something that on the hard days can also keep me fueled to keep doing what I'm doing.

"People are very grateful that you have chosen to come back."

Dr. Hnatuik, who passed away in 2010, settled in Provost soon after completing medical school.

Joan Noonan, Dr. Hnatuik's eldest daughter, recalls times that her father was the only

physician practising in the town of under 2,000 residents.

“He worked his butt off. He was very involved in trying to get physicians to come to rural practices, because he went through times where he was by himself and that’s just not life sustaining. It’s very hard on one person to be available 24/7 in the eyes of the community.”



Dr. Stephan Malan, Dr. John Hnatuik, front, and Dr. Deon Erasmus (who was later awarded the 2019 RhPAP Rhapsody Physician

Award of Distinction), pose for a photo at Provost Hospital in the late 1990s. RhPAP named a bursary in Dr. Hnatuik's honour, in recognition of his contributions to rural healthcare.

—Photo supplied by Joan Noonan

Community was also important to Dr. Hnatuik. He served as mayor, on the school board, and other roles.

Noonan says her dad would have been pleased to know his namesake bursary was established to support rural physicians and, in turn, bolster rural Alberta communities.

"I think he would be proud of the fact that his mentoring of physicians over the years has carried on through a bursary for the younger generation to come up and hopefully continue with rural medicine.

"The fact that there are still students out there that do want to head the rural route is appreciative of the RHPAP program."