

Physician tells her story to Rotary

President-elect Dr. Susan King gave her personal perspective on the issues facing physicians in this province in a speech to the Northeast Avalon Rotary Club on October 9. Following are excerpts from her remarks.

When I was 10 and in Grade 5 we had a student teacher and I remember telling her of my desire to become a doctor. There was no explanation for it — no medical people in my family. In fact, I was the first to attend university. But, to become a doctor was my dream and I was fortunate enough to be able to fulfil that ambition.

When entered medical practice, I really thought the only source of stress and the biggest challenge I would have would be in diagnosing difficult cases . . . but no. The challenges and frustrations are with trying to provide for my patients. Of having to beg for timely access to tests and specialist appointment. Of constantly having to apologize to patients.

. . . the lack of resources wears me down. Going home, knowing how many I've sent home worried. Worried because they have to wait for two months before they can get a biopsy of a breast lump, four months before a CAT scan, the list goes on. When I wake in the morning I think of how many favors I have to call in today — how many of my patients will have to wait while I play telephone tag to arrange for follow up of urgent cases. Don't get me wrong, my colleagues are very helpful and supportive. But they, too, are stressed beyond capacity.

Have things eroded as much as we claim? I worked at the emergency of the Janeway hospital when I first qualified. When we saw a patient with a broken bone, the only limiting factor that determined when the child would have his bone set was when he last ate. A few years ago my son broke his hand. It was a bad break, in his right hand in two knuckle joints. It was a full seven days before he had his surgery —totally unacceptable, but now the norm.

I come before you today as a non-practicing physician. To withdraw services, to be on strike, was not something I ever thought I'd be doing. This is not what I had in mind when I became a physician. Through all the previous labor disputes I always rested easy in knowing that I would never be in a position whereby I would not provide for my patients. I never envisioned such action. The doctors of the province have voluntarily agreed that something has to be done. The future is not uncertain — we know what the future holds and the future is bleak.

We have an aging population of doctors. In this province we have 930 practicing doctors. Of that group, 210 are over the age of 55, 122 are over 60, 64 over 65 and yes, we even have 26 over 70 who still provide a necessary and valuable service in their area of expertise and to their community. This is in stark contrast to the 16 of our members who are under 30.

These numbers concern us. They should be of concern to you, the consumer of health care. Above all, they ought to concern the government. As it stands now, without an influx of new physicians we are in trouble. Everyone is concerned about doctors leaving, but if all the doctors here now stay, we will still be in dire straights in the next decade. Who will look after us as we age? Who will look after our aging parents? Our children? Our grandchildren?

In many ways we are like a sports team. Our players are commodities, up for grabs. Available to the highest bidder. Right now we don't have a full team. Our bullpen is empty. We must cross cover – the third baseman has to cover the outfield. There are few, if any line changes. Ladies and gentlemen, I say to you that in 2002, in Canada, to provide quality, efficient and timely health care for our people, we need a full team.

In closing, I'd like to reassure all of you that it is in the interest of the future of health in Newfoundland and Labrador that takes us out of our offices, clinics and operating rooms. What we want is an attractive and fair work environment and compensation package that will recruit and retain physicians for our province. It is predictable that if this is not settled now, in a decade or before, we will look back and reminisce about the good old days at the turn of the century when one could get somewhat adequate medical care.

The money is only an issue in so much as without it we cannot have the critical number and mixture of physicians to provide proper, timely and up to date medical care to the people of our province. Doctors are a dedicated, hard working and committed group. But as one physician put it to me: no one hears of people going to their grave wishing they had spent more time at the office.