

## 'They need access to family physicians:' Foundation helps new doctors stay in N.B.



Dr. Michael Bone, said when he graduated medical school he decided to practice as a family doctor in Hampton because it reminded him of his hometown St. Stephen, and it was close to both he and his wife's family.

Photo: Matthew Daigle/ Telegraph-Journal



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## Sarah Seeley | Times & Transcript

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When Dr. Michael Bone was choosing a place to practice as a family doctor, he knew he wanted to stay close to his small town roots.

Bone, originally from St. Stephen, graduated from the Dalhousie Medicine New Brunswick program, and in 2017 decided to join the practice of Dr. Doug Hall in Hampton, the clinic where he had done a community placement.

“It’s similar to the small town I grew up in. There’s lots of opportunity to be involved in the community,” he said, noting he and his wife and children live in Quispamsis to be close to family, as well as the Saint John Regional Hospital where his wife works. “I think it’s the perfect place for me.”

Bone started studying to be a teacher and worked for the Canadian Border Services Agency in St. Stephen before applying to medical school.

He received the Friends of the Christofor Foundation Scholarship from the New Brunswick Medical Education Foundation, which helped with his tuition during school.

"Med school is stressful and any sort of thing that can help you get through that and lessen the stress is going to help people succeed," he said, adding doctors often graduate with student loan debt in the six figures.

The foundation is a private, not-for-profit organization that offers scholarships and bursaries to New Brunswickers who are accepted into a medical school accredited by the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons.

Scholarships range from \$4,000 to \$12,500 a year, and cover tuition. In accepting the scholarship, the recipients pledge to stay and practice in New Brunswick after residency. Their return of service, of the amount of time they agree to stay in the province, depends on the level of scholarship they receive.

There are 154 students who have pledged a return to service, while 168 students have been helped financially through the foundation, said executive director Darren McLeod. The scholarships are funded by corporations, private donors and provincial and municipal governments, he said.

To become a doctor, students complete four years of an undergraduate degree, four years of medical school, and at least two years as a resident. Further study may be required depending on the specialty chosen.

McLeod said there are 22 people who had received a bursary from the foundation and are now working in New Brunswick. In their history of awarding scholarships, only six people decided to leave

the province, and had to pay back their bursary, he noted.

This year, the foundation gave out 56 scholarships worth a collective \$382,000, an increase from the 42 bursaries totalling \$304,000 handed out last year.

Yuna Im, a first-year medical student at the Saint-John based Dalhousie Medicine New Brunswick, received a four-year renewable bursary. Im, a Moncton resident, said she chose the New Brunswick medical program because of the small class size.

"It feels more like a community and I really like that," she said. "It's my home province. It's where I'm most comfortable."

Though she just started medical school, she is already considering specializing in psychiatry. She gained an interest in child and adolescent psychiatry after her experiences with friends who struggled with various mental health issues, and doing various volunteer work in the mental health field. Another interest is helping newcomers and refugees who face barriers accessing health care.

When she graduates, she is thinking about practicing in one of the province's major cities, particularly in Moncton, Im said.

"I want to be somewhere where people can easily access the services," she said, adding she is aware of the shortage of psychiatrists in the province.

Im said she enjoys the slower pace of Moncton after being in large cities, and prefers the proximity to natural landscapes and hiking.

The Don and Jane Mitchener Medical Education Scholarship has allowed her to focus on her studies, research and extra-curricular activities.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought added focus to the importance of health care, McLeod said, and new donors and companies came forward to set up additional scholarships. A new endowment was also created, he said.

Doctors are continuing to retire and more people have been moving to New Brunswick during the pandemic, said McLeod, increasing the need for family doctors.

“They need access to family physicians, they need access to health care, and they need access to specialists,” he said. “That’s where the foundation plays a huge role.”

Health Department spokesperson Bruce Macfarlane said in an email there are 186 physician vacancies in the province. This includes 80 general practitioners - including family physicians and emergency room physicians- and 106 specialists. Over 50 per cent of the vacancies are in rural areas, outside the three largest cities, he said.

As of August there are 48,369 active registrants on the Patient Connect list, waiting for a family physician. Over a seven-month period, from January to August, 22,508 people were matched with a physician, Macfarlane said.

McLeod said it takes several newly graduated family doctors to take the patient load of one retiring family doctor. New doctors are also looking for a suitable work-life balance, and are taking on multiple roles like working as hospitalists, doing shifts in after hours clinics, or teaching.

While working in Hampton, Bone said he arrived at a time when family doctors were retiring or moving their practices. He has been able to take over the files of existing patients, and take patients off the wait list. In addition, he is also in a call group for patients in hospital, and travels to St. Stephen once a week to care for patients at a nursing home.

Medical students often travel to Hampton for clinical placements, and Bone not only gets a chance to teach them, but show them life in the town.

Bone said he has always been able to be there for his family, such as dropping off his children at school and being home for supper.

"I work a full-time schedule and I pride myself on having a good work-life balance, yet still offering good availability to my patients," he said.

McLeod said he would like to see the number of donations grow in the future to support more students and ease the financial burden of their schooling.

"I think it would be extraordinarily wonderful if we could be a partner in all of the seats in the province," he said.

The Department of Health supports the New Brunswick Medical Education Foundation in its work to recruit and retain New Brunswick medical students, said Macfarlane.

"This supports the province's goals with retaining these scholarship learners in the province to provide medical services to New Brunswick citizens," he said.