



Reflections

“An honour and a privilege”

James T.B. Rourke, MD, CCFP(EM), MCLSC, FCFP

I wiped away a tear, set the letter down, and paused to reflect on its meaning. The letter seemed more about the heart of family medicine than about me. It speaks to the important roles family physicians play in the lives of patients and their families. It could have been written to countless family physicians in every

province in Canada who provide complex continuing care for their patients. With the writer's permission, I share it with you.

The writer's mother, a big, strong-minded, sometimes crusty farm wife with a large family, had been a patient of mine since I started practice 25 years ago when she was in her 40s. Over the years, Dr Leslie Rourke (my wife and partner) and I also provided office, hospital, emergency, and obstetric care to several of her children and grandchildren.

Over time, her problems and visits became increasingly complex, and for the last 10 years, she had a long list of medical problems, an even longer list of medications, and a very thick chart. As we delved into the intertwining of her life and illnesses and struggled with dilemmas, we developed the kind of meaningful patient-doctor relationship that does not arise from the mythical one-problem-per-patient-per-visit. In the hustle and bustle of our busy family practices, caring for patients who carry heavy burdens of life and illness provides not only our greatest challenges but often our greatest rewards. As we leave our long-time practice and say goodbye to our patients, our last office days are full of congratulations, hugs, and tears. It is a great honour and a privilege to be a family physician. ❁

Dr James Rourke has practised for 25 years in Goderich, Ont, with his wife, Dr Leslie Rourke. They are moving to St John's, Nfld, where he has been appointed Dean of Medicine at Memorial University and she will teach family medicine.

December 3, 2003

Dear Dr Rourke,

Congratulations on your new endeavours, Dr Rourke. You are so deserving of your new position in Newfoundland. Please accept my sincerest wishes for you and your family.

I am ... the daughter of ... a patient of yours [who died].... I am sure you will remember me having been with Mom to all of her doctor's appointments.

You are probably wondering why I am writing this letter to you, but I feel that it is something that I have to do.

Dr Rourke, I need to write this to you to have a final closure ... in regard to my mother's passing. You were an excellent physician to her, and she thought the world of you. Never once did we leave your office with unanswered questions or things left unsaid. She had the utmost trust and respect for you. As a daughter, I must tell you that the way you handled my mom for all those years touched my heart. You were not only her doctor but her friend and someone ... she confided in. Also the way you allowed the whole ... family into your office to discuss mom's condition was exceptional on your part. I was aware of the severity of Mom's condition but my brothers were not, and when you explained it to them it made the shock ... easier for them as only a week after that meeting did Mom pass away. They do not listen well to a sister, so you made it easier for me to prepare them.

Another memory that sticks in my mind was when Mom was on her deathbed in the hospital and you gave me that hug and told me that I had been a good daughter to her made me realize that being a doctor [comprises] many elements.... Your treatment of my mother over the years was absolutely wonderful, and... I am thanking you from the bottom of my heart. You made Mom's passing easier for her. That is a gift you gave us as a family.

I feel better having typed this letter to you ... I wish you all the best, Dr Rourke, to you and your family. If you leave Goderich with only one memory, please let it be that you have touched many lives during your practice. You are not only a physician leaving but also a friend.

Thanks so much for being a wonderful doctor and a caring human being.
Sincerely, Mrs....