



A passion for rural medicine

John Wootton, MD
Shawville, Que.

Scientific editor, CJRM

Correspondence to:
Dr. John Wootton,
Box 1086, Shawville
QC J0X 2Y0

Scanning the recently published SRPC *Manual of Rural Practice*, and reading the contributions of the myriad authors who participated, makes me realize that there are many of us with a passion for rural medicine.

Passion is however a coat of many colours. In a relationship it can be nurturing, supportive and affectionate, or it can turn to jealousy and possessiveness and become pathological and obsessive, leading to assault or worse. At work, and specifically in medical work, it can be an engine for high quality compassionate care, or it can blur the limits of competence and undermine the benefits of team work and collaboration.

In a recent French newspaper, "Hagar the Horrible" comic strip (not reproduced here for lack of the required permission), Hagar addresses a group of potential recruits:* "I'm looking for brave warriors who laugh at danger and death, and who aren't looking for huge salaries at any cost!" Needless to say the recruits all head for the hills. In the next panel his sidekick turns to him and says: "That was the worst recruitment speech I have ever heard!"

Hagar has passion, but clearly little media training. He sounds, however, remarkably like rural physicians do when they talk about their work. Is this passion healthy? Is the reaction of those Viking recruits actually sensible self-preservation? Is Hagar passionate about being a Viking, or is he obsessed?

*My translation. *Hagar dunor*. Oct 10, 2006. *Le Droit*

I have other passions that I indulge when I can: sailing, old cars, motorcycles, history. They all share something that I hope distinguishes them from obsessions — respect. When I am afloat, and the wind is pushing my 7-ton wooden sloop into an Atlantic swell, I am acutely aware of the small dimple that we make on that great ocean's face, and the debt that I will owe this boat when the fog parts and I have reached port safely. When I struggle with a rusty bolt underneath my 30-year-old landrover, I marvel at the simplicity of its design, and the common sense of its designers, as I humbly try to keep her going.

Obsessions on the other hand are controlling, refusing to acknowledge the complexities to be faced and the limits of individuals. Obsessions have no room for respect.

A passion for rural medicine, in its best sense, is a respectful passion grounded in a desire to serve our communities. In spite of the difficulties and the complex environment within which we work, rural physicians must still navigate with whatever information their compass and the weather allows. Sometimes it's clear sailing — sometimes the fog closes in. We must remain alert for the "cowboys" among us, whose obsessiveness could be dangerous, and try to teach a passionate practice to those who must come after. We may be tilting at windmills, but we do so with big heart. Hopefully our recruits will hang around long enough to hear the whole story, and will, in the end, be at our side when next we lay siege to the castle.