



Gone sailing

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When I was in medical school, one of my mentors advised me that when it came time to enter general practice I was to get a membership at the local golf club. “But I don’t golf?” He laughed as he explained. “If you drink at the local bar you’re a drunk, but if you drink at the clubhouse you have been working hard!”

By most definitions I have taken up neither golf nor drinking. However, there are several truths I’ve learned based on this advice. When you are engaged in a profession with the responsibility of rural practice, there is something to be said for a regular diversion. For me it’s not men’s night at the local 9-hole golf course, but sailing out of the 176-slip Haileybury marina.

Wednesday evenings are sacrosanct in the summer for me, as it is race night. It doesn’t matter if it’s pouring or if there isn’t any wind in sight; I load up the cooler and head to the boat. It is not patients or committee meetings at the hospital, or even my family that fill my mind. It’s hoisting the main, trimming the jib and wondering if I can make the mark on this tack.

I never do ER on these days, and on those occasions when I mistakenly have a beeper or cellphone with me, the problem gets handled over the phone, it waits until sundown or they get the person in ER, because I can’t get there for an hour when I’m sailing.

Yes, there are days when I break my own rules, leave the boat in a mess

and run up the dock so I can get to the hospital because someone is crowning. This is remarkable for 2 reasons: it’s been my choice to attend the birth and the deliveries that I have missed haven’t happened on a sailing Wednesday.

I have a colleague who races against me, others who golf, some who curl, some who play hockey, and others who block off time for fishing on and off the ice. It doesn’t matter what it is; what matters is that it gives people time to be a part of the community while not being the doctor. It’s a good thing for us rural doctor types who really do work hard.

I’m not saying that you need to be unavailable. If you are unavailable too frequently and unpredictably it’s a problem. If you notice it in a colleague, you start worrying about their organizational skills, their mental well-being and/or how much alcohol is being consumed. Don’t leave it to the point where the colleague is marked as unreliable by the nurses and is hauled in by the chief of staff (or by the college!).

I am making an argument for protected time. Being able to drop your “I’m the doctor” persona and walk in your community as a regular person, even for a short time, is a good thing. It’s amazing how my protected 0.5% of the year makes the other 99.5% of the year easier.

I’d write more, but it’s actually Wednesday, at the end of summer, shortly after 6 pm, and it’s been raining, so I should go and bail the bilge before the race ...