

Rumours and prejudice

*Peter Hutten-Czapalski,
MD*

*Scientific editor, CJRM
Haileybury, Ont.*

*Correspondence to:
Peter Hutten-Czapalski;
phc@srpc.ca*

When you live in a small town, people know who you are. They see you when you go to the post office to pick up your mail. While driving to the post office, you do so with only one hand on the wheel because the other is busy waving. They see you when you go for a walk or a bike ride. They are there to share both your triumphs and your failures.

For a physician living and practising in a rural community, all of these things are magnified. This does not necessarily mean that you are held to a higher standard, just to a different one.

In rural Newfoundland, for example, doctors are expected to be of a different race than the locals. It's not clear why, but it may be attributable to a tradition of international medical graduates earning their licences there. Regardless of your ethnicity or race, as a physician, you may be held to a different standard.

For example, I know of rural towns that are otherwise unlikely to hold a gay pride parade, but the members are quite accepting of rural doctors who happen to be homosexual.

By being in the "doctor" category, you are given enough leniency to avoid some of the usual prejudices that might

apply; but it's not a *carte blanche*. Some patients will not see the black doctor, or they may prefer the black doctor for their rectal exam over the homosexual doctor. However, I think there is a genuine willingness in small communities to see doctors as individuals.

Still, you need to be a bit careful to protect your reputation. Rumours do affect you.

Most of the time you can just ride out the rumour (e.g., that you are leaving town). However, if the rumour is centred on a case going bad, regardless of the court's take on your culpability, you will have to consider that your ability to treat a portion of the population will be impaired. You may have to leave town. It's a tough call that hopefully you will never need to make.

Being mindful of how your actions can play out is important. My somewhat flippant advice to new graduates is to always get a membership at the local golf club. It's not important that they actually play golf. It's just that when you buy a drink there, the rumour will start that you are working too hard. You buy a drink at the local bar, and you're a drunken louse.

They don't teach you that in medical school.