

Neepawa doctor to lead by example

By Michele McDougall

As the new president of Doctors Manitoba, Neepawa family physician Dr. Nichelle Desilets says she intends to lead by example and be a voice for rural Manitoba.

“It really is an honour and privilege to be chosen to represent your profession in an organization like Doctors Manitoba,” Desilets said recently in her Neepawa clinic.

“If you look at the profession in the past, generally you would see an older, probably white, probably male figurehead at the head of an organization.



Dr. Randy Guzman, a vascular surgeon and past president of Doctors Manitoba, is seen at St. Boniface Hospital. (The Brandon Sun files)

“So, I’m honoured and really proud to represent female physicians, Indigenous physicians, rural physicians and young physicians.”

Doctors Manitoba represents more than 4,000 physicians and qualified medical students across the province. It is an advocacy organization for doctors, governed by doctors who are elected to the board of directors from medical districts across the province. The president is traditionally selected from board members.

Desilets, 39, said she got involved at the board level because she saw “flaws in the health-care system” and had ideas about how to advocate for better care for her patients in rural Manitoba.

“I’m a doctor in Neepawa. You don’t need to talk to me about the difference between rural health care and urban health care. But I certainly don’t blame my urban colleagues for some of the gaps that exist — I think it affects them too. I think physicians across Manitoba, including in Winnipeg, are concerned about rural health-care discrepancies,” Desilets said.

Desilets went to medical school at the University of Calgary, completed a residency in rural family medicine in Prince Albert, Sask., and a clinical clerkship in Yellowknife, N.W.T.

She sees her patients at Beautiful Plains Community Medical Clinic, takes shifts at the Neepawa Health Centre and its emergency department, delivers babies and does surgeries.

“We do a little bit of everything. I don’t think there really is anything more exciting than that,” Desilets said.

Manitoba gained 133 doctors from May 2023 to April 2024, which surpassed the previous high of 83 in 2014, but the province is still short 346 doctors.

In terms of family physicians, the province has the lowest per capita rate in Canada.

It’s a burden that predominantly falls on rural communities, said Desilets.

“So we’re going to continue working hard on this issue as well as physician morale and physician wellness, finding ways to let doctors be doctors.

“We want to reduce unnecessary paperwork so that doctors can spend more time with their patients. We want to take a good, hard look at things like artificial intelligence, to use it appropriately and safely, where it might be able to assist doctors,” she said.

“The goal of these types of things would be to reduce burnout among physicians, which we know is a really important part of what makes a doctor choose to continue their work or not.”

Desilets takes over for Dr. Randy Guzman, whose one-year term ended in April.

He has been working as a vascular surgeon at St. Boniface Hospital in Winnipeg for more than 20 years.

Guzman had just come out of the operating room after conducting an aneurysm repair when the Sun spoke to him recently, asking about his experience as president and if he had any advice for Desilets.

“Dr. Desilets has it down pat. She doesn’t need my advice,” Guzman said.



Dr. Nichelle Desilets is the new president-elect of Doctors Manitoba. (Tim Smith/The Brandon Sun)

“But there are ongoing challenges ahead. We’re short of doctors, with the second-lowest number of doctors per capita in Canada, and there are still patients waiting in emergency rooms and sitting on wait lists,” he said.

During his presidency, Guzman said he gained a broader perspective and appreciation for what other physicians are going through after visiting them “on their home turf.”

“You have to realize the environment they’re working in and what challenges they have, which helped to see how to best advocate for patients,” he said.

Doctors Manitoba has changed its advocacy and messaging over the last few years, Guzman added.

“They’re getting out there even more now.”

In 2023, it launched the website gettinghealthy.ca to help Manitobans make better choices to improve their health, with contests to encourage participation.

Last November, Doctors Manitoba called for the elimination of sick notes that doctors are asked to write, in an effort to make more time for patients. And the following month, the organization created the website manitobamd.com and placed advertisements in medical magazines and newsletters to draw doctors to the province, specifically targeting health-care providers in the United States.

The latest physician services agreement that was ratified in the summer of 2023 was a “big game-changer” for doctors, said Desilets, who applauded the previous government for its role in negotiations.

Desilets said while she will use her platform to address rural health-care discrepancies, she hopes to inspire new and upcoming physicians who might consider the “adventure of being a rural family doctor who does a little bit of everything.”

“Despite all the challenges in the health-care system, I’m not naive, I’m not going to say that there aren’t any, because there are,” she said.

“But I see the people who are trying to affect change, and I hope to be one of them. I’m optimistic that we’re going to get there.”

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