

Celebrating the Many Joys (and a few challenges) of Rural Practice

Rural family physicians share their passion with MAHEC learners



Jay Erickson, MD, and Aaron Beck, MD, share the joys of rural family practice with UNC SOM Asheville Campus medical students and MAHEC residents and fellows.

On Wednesday April 25th, rural physicians Jay Erickson, MD, and Aaron Beck, MD, spoke to a room full of learners at MAHEC that included 40 medical students, residents, and physician fellows interested in rural practice.

Jay is a family physician practicing in Whitefish, Montana and the Assistant Dean for Regional Affairs for Montana at the University of Washington School of Medicine's WWAMI Program, which includes teaching sites in Washington, Wyoming, Alaska, Montana, and Idaho. Aaron is a graduate of the Hendersonville Family Medicine Residency Program and practices family medicine in Fort Atkinson, a small community 10 miles from where he grew up in southern Wisconsin.

Jay and Aaron described the joys of being a family physician in a small rural community, which include being able to practice full-spectrum care, working in an independent practice, and getting to know their patients' lives beyond the clinic walls at places like their children's school functions, the grocery store, an annual 12K run or the community pool.

Both physicians shared how satisfying it was to organize community health projects like building a youth sports park or starting a free clinic. They also noted the benefits of raising children in a community where they knew their teachers, friends and other parents.

"Being able to attend births and deaths and make home visits over the years has been really meaningful," Jay shared. "You might be able to do that in a bigger place, but it's much easier in a small town."

They also answered learners' questions about a variety of aspects of rural practice and recommended training in motivational interviewing and practice management.

When asked how to prevent burnout, they both agreed on the importance of finding mentors, keeping the bigger mission in mind, and exercising every day. They also emphasized the

need to reach out to colleagues, including those from other specialties and practices, to share knowledge and prevent professional isolation.

So what about the challenges of rural practice?

They acknowledged that living in a small community can make boundaries a little blurry as they have to wear many hats as leaders in their communities. While setting clear boundaries is essential, they cautioned against trying to avoid dual relationships as this is nearly impossible.

Both had grown up in small communities, which is why they gravitated to rural practice.

"In family medicine, we're linked to patients through our relationships," Aaron emphasized.

Being able to attend births and deaths and make home visits over the years has been really meaningful.

"I developed these relationship skills growing up in a rural community. These are the same skills I use now."

The evening was inspiring and informative for those who were interested in establishing a rural primary care practice.

MAHEC plans to organize similar events in the future with guests from a variety of health disciplines and specialties.



Jay Erickson, MD, has practiced family medicine in Montana for more than 30 years and is an assistant dean at University of Washington SOM.