

# An Interview with the CRA's 2011 Distinguished Rheumatologist: Dr. Gunnar R. Kraag

What do you believe are the qualities of a distinguished rheumatologist?

There is no guidebook or list of qualities for this award. The prime requirement is a contribution to our specialty which can occur through a wide number of avenues and activities. In the end, it is the respect and affection of colleagues that determines who has left a mark on rheumatology and deserves recognition as "Distinguished Rheumatologist."

John Esdaile once wrote in the *CRAJ* that answering this question was tricky since "one could not be distinguished until one was dead and the whole page could be written." Fortunately, the CRA does not wait that long or both John and I would be out of an award.

Why did you become a rheumatologist? What or who influenced you along the way to do so?

As an intern at Queen's, I was assigned to a rotation on the arthritis ward. I tried desperately to trade with someone as this was not a popular rotation. No one traded! I then met the irrepressible Garfield 'Gub' Kelly and the very cool Doug Kinsella (taught me what a T-cell was), loved the patients and had an outstanding experience.

While at the Toronto Western Hospital, I decided on cardiology as a career, but then met Jack Crawford (Rehab) and Jack Reynolds during a rotation and was reintroduced to rheumatology, which rekindled my interest in the field. I was also exposed to terrific lectures by Dunc Gordon, Hugh Smythe, Metro Ogryzlo and Murray Urowitz. I was sold. I withdrew from cardiology and switched to rheumatology.

When did you become certain that you wished to pursue a career in medicine and not become a professional athlete?

You might recall several years ago at the Canada Night Dinner during the ACR meeting in Washington, D.C., Rubin "Hurricane" Carter, the professional middleweight boxer, was the guest speaker. During his speech, he mentioned that many people had asked him what his toughest



fight was. He replied that there was no doubt in his mind that it was a narrow victory over Gunnar Kraag. People bought me many drinks that night wanting to hear all the details. So the legend began.

There are many other stories concerning the NFL, NHL, CFL, golf and tennis. Even a story about a career in figure skating shortened by injury was hot for a while.

True? Total fabrication? Urban legend? BS?

Let's talk about it some time.

Was it always inevitable that you would practice in a university setting?

Absolutely not! I considered community practice very seriously and Peterborough was a strong option. I also looked at several other opportunities but decided to stay at McMaster. Thirty-six years later, I am still in a university setting so I guess it was the right choice.

You have been promoted to a number of university administrative positions in your career. What have

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been the frustrations and rewards of working as a section and department head?

There are rewards?

I was known to carp a great deal about hospital and university administrations. Therefore, when the opportunity to get involved presented itself, I couldn't turn it down. My major administrative roles were Chief of Staff, Chief of Medicine, Vice-president Medicine Portfolio, Deputy Chair of the University Department of Medicine, and Hospital and University Chief of Rheumatology. I enjoyed these responsibilities thoroughly and came to appreciate the other side of the fence. I was delighted to see more and more doctors having input into hospital affairs with many physicians developing management skills often through executive MBA courses and assuming major administrative positions. The frustrations inherent in a bureaucracy remain, but I found out the administrators do a much, much better job when they listen to physicians. By the way, I also found out that dealing with physicians is not like herding cats, as has been suggested, but more like trying to herd squirrels.

You have held a number of portfolios in the CRA including that of President. What are the greatest challenges and achievements of the CRA on your watch?

I think the most exciting and daring venture during my presidency was the purchase of the *Journal of Rheumatology*. The CRA had real financial concerns, but I am delighted to see that two years later things are very sound. We did the right thing!

Our annual meeting remained a jewel and continued to improve. Our sponsorship support remained strong and continued to grow. The CRA remains financially sound and, believe me, that allows the CRA executive to sleep nights without the 10 mg of lorazepam.

Otherwise, I would say that my greatest achievement was to have the good sense to let the committees and members do their thing and stay out of the way.

I would be remiss in not mentioning that my role as the chief captioneer for the CRAJ is personally one of my proudest roles. Where else could I say the things I do without risking physical harm?

What does the CRA mean to you personally?

Should the theme to "Love Story" be playing now? We rheumatologists are a small, tight-knit, proud, and very collegial group and I have said it often and will say it again: I have never met a rheumatologist I didn't like. It has given me immense pleasure to be a CRA member and eventually President. It has been incredibly satisfying to work with fellow members who never cease to amaze me by their willingness to work on behalf of their colleagues despite other pressing responsibilities including jobs that are not exactly 9 to 5. This organization has come a long way and continues to grow. My involvement has been rewarding and a lot of fun!

What should the CRA aspire to be in the future?

Excellent!

Is it true that you have never met a rheumatologist you didn't like?

Absolutely.

P.S. I still feel I won that fight with Hurricane.

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## Student Awardees at the 2011 CRA Annual Meeting

### Best Overall Presentation

Roberta Berard,  
University of Toronto (supervisor: Dr. Claire Bombardier)

### Philip Rosen Award, Best Clinical Presentation

Marie Clements Baker,  
McMaster University (supervisor: Dr. Nader Khalidi)

### Ian Watson Award

Brandusa Florica,  
University of Toronto (supervisor: Dr. Paul Fortin)

### Best Basic Science Presentation

Nigel Haroon,  
University of Toronto (supervisor: Dr. Robert Inman)

### Medical Student Poster Award

Jennifer Lee,  
Queen's University (supervisor: Dr. Paul Fortin,  
University of Toronto)