

# Mandatory Reading

By Glen Thomson, MD, FRCPC

In a land more renowned for its blizzards than beaches, summer is a much-anticipated and appreciated interlude. This is even more true for students. For many young people planning post-secondary studies in the autumn, the summer represents an opportunity to seek employment to fund their higher education. For a fortunate few, it is an opportunity to travel, seek experiences and learn without the need for a summer job.

Volunteerism has in recent years become more visible and necessary to carry out many otherwise-unfunded activities within our society. I think those who of their own free will engage in activities to help the disadvantaged, preserve the environment, sustain their places of worship, and participate in political parties should be applauded for donating their time. Those who participate in these projects benefit by being part of a defined community and are rewarded by a higher sense of purpose.

I am concerned with “mandatory volunteerism.” The term itself is an oxymoron. If you are not participating freely, then you are not really a volunteer. Unfortunately, many medical schools across Canada now have a requirement of a specific number of hours of “mandatory volunteerism.” Presumably, this is to ensure that those young people planning a life in medicine will be the right sort of individual. In practice, I think it is prejudicial to those people of lower socioeconomic status who cannot afford time to volunteer while trying to pay for increasingly higher tuition fees.

It is not unreasonable to ask that future physicians have some interpersonal skills and an ability to communicate and empathize with the ordinary Canadian. Summer jobs have at least the same chance of providing this experience as mandatory volunteer positions. I recall my own earliest employment experiences working at the local horse racing track, as an Eaton’s mail boy, and later as a city laborer on garbage and boulevard crews. Each of these new worlds was initially as foreign to me as, I am sure, ordinary people find the high-tech, frequently bureaucratic and impersonal world of modern healthcare. With my personal lack of volunteering experience, I doubt that I would currently be admitted to a contemporary medical school. I fear that “mandatory volunteerism” as a requirement for medical school may be leading to cynicism about collecting the necessary hours rather than



Editor volunteering for the CRAJ at the seaside.

focusing on the life experiences that create better citizens. In this issue, our lead article talks about summer jobs and what influences they may have had. The Joint Count Survey answers the question—what is the best summer experience for prospective physicians before entering medical school?

Accreditation of continuing medical education (CME) hours is also discussed in this issue by Drs. John Thomson and Carter Thorne. Accumulating these hours to maintain your Royal College Fellowship became mandatory more than a decade ago. A large bureaucracy has subsequently been created to oversee this enterprise, while Royal College fees have increased to support this endeavor. Now it takes almost as much

effort and time to chronicle that which you have learned as spent actually learning it. After spending the better part of two decades involved in the development of rheumatology CME or, for that matter, real participation in CME, is any better today than before the Maintenance of Competence (MOCOMP) programme became compulsory.

For the last CRA/MCR meeting, I had to put my signature on the mass of forms comprising an application to hold an educational event accredited for CME/continuing professional development (CPD) hours. The process is convoluted; long on the theory of educational needs and short on practicality. The CRA is rightly pursuing the privilege of being an accreditor of CME events so that future rheumatology education can be adjudicated by peers. The other policy advances from the CRA Executive Retreat are recorded in the issue’s Joint Communiqué.

Before signing off for the summer, the CRA Editorial Board would like to express gratitude to our managing editor, Katherine Ellis, who is moving on to new challenges in the nation’s capital. On a personal note, her enthusiasm for the *Journal of the Canadian Rheumatology Association (CRAJ)* has been infectious. Kate’s creativity has elevated the bar for each issue. Thank you.

It is mandatory for all readers to have a safe and enjoyable summer.

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