

## *Interprofessional Rural Program of BC: The Key to Obtaining Rural Health Workers*

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*Photo by Monica Milewski, a former IRPbc student,  
who is now working at the hospital.  
Courtesy of Christy Dowling.*

Some of you may have heard about the IRPbc program, but many of you may not. The IRPbc (Interprofessional Rural Program of BC) is a new initiative funded by the government for students in the health care field. Designed to attract health science students, it gives them an opportunity to live, work under the direction of a professional in their chosen field, and experience rural life.

It is a program that is viewed as successful by both the working professionals here at the hospital and the students. These past months, we had several such students with us at the Bella Coola General Hospital: Ivana Dojcinovic, Pharmacy student; Becky Walker, Nursing student; and Sheena Williams, Nursing student. Each enjoyed their placement here and spoke enthusiastically about what they had learned.

Colleen Stewart is from Vancouver and, like the other IRPbc participants, had never been to Bella Coola before. “I first heard about Bella Coola from my professor when he introduced us to the IRPbc program and announced where the IRPbc program placement opportunities were.” Since that moment, she wanted to take up one of the rural opportunities since she felt it would be a safe way to gain exposure to a far-off place. By “safe” she meant that she would have the support of the program, and other students around her.

Simultaneously she was nervous and excited, because she thought that the isolation of living in a small town would be scary and lonely. What she found, however, was quite the opposite! “I found the people open, friendly, and more hospitable than I could have imagined. It was really nice being here,” said Colleen. “I mean, where else would anyone just lend you their cross-country ski equipment?” She went on to tell me about the glorious day out she had, and how much it opened up a new world to her—quite literally, I imagine! “In Vancouver it is all about the money. Here in Bella Coola it is more about pitching-in, sharing and community life.”

She had no previous experience of mental health social work before this time in Bella Coola. Carole Clark, our mental health worker, was Colleen’s ‘preceptor’ (IRPbc local mentor/supervisor). “Carole was very supportive. She was interested in my learning curve, facilitated my exposure to new

opportunities and experiences, and was there when I needed back up,” Colleen recalls. “She really was a wealth of knowledge.”

She told me how certain clients have touched her. “Some of the issues were overwhelming,” she revealed, “but people are so valuable and have so much to offer—sometimes they just don’t see it.”

I asked her if she had any experiences that stand out more than others; whether it was ‘holy-cow, the mountains!’ or something else. “Oh yeah,” she laughed “it was ‘holy-cow’ the mountains every day here!” Then she went on to say that her outdoor experiences here really opened up a new chapter in her life. She said she has gained in confidence in many ways outside her professional development.

“I was so scared of the Hill, but determined not to let it stop me from doing things,” she said. That, and flying. Tamping down her nerves, she braved one of the worst weather days and hopped the plane to Bella Bella, in order to not miss out on that experience. Apparently while she was marveling at the clouds, exclaiming how pretty they were, the pilot was considering turning back because those clouds “were SO pretty”—pretty darn low and plentiful, that is.

“Overall, Bella Coola has totally exceeded my expectations. I’m now so open to the idea of living and working in a rural community, whereas before I was kind of apprehensive about it,” admitted Colleen. “The beauty of the IRPbc program is that one gets exposed to the job and incredible experiences, but under the support and guidance of someone knowledgeable.”

Thanks to this experience, Colleen is likely to continue on in mental health social work, and is definitely going to look for a rural placement when she graduates with a Bachelor of Social Work from UBC in the spring. She even has her eye on a job prospect here in Bella Coola.

The students would like to thank the community members who allowed the students to work with them; the experience they gained is invaluable. The health professionals find the program useful also. They are happy to have the temporary help, but primarily excited by the fact that several students have chosen to come back and work here. “This is helpful in that they are already trained, they know the people, the place and have skills that have been developed here,” revealed one hospital staff member. “Plus, the students gain exposure to unique environments they might not have in any other circumstances. It is a win-win situation.”

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