

Dr. William (Bill) Eaton



Dr. Bill Eaton is a Family Physician with an interest in Palliative Care that first sprouted during his clinical training. He is now well known in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador as a Palliative Care Champion. He became involved in Palliative Care in the late 1970s, a time when Palliative Care in hospitals was not a well-known concept. He recalls being willing and available to provide palliative care and worked at a nursing home where his colleagues would refer patients requiring end of life care. He learned his skills both on the job and from individuals such as Dr. Balfour Mount (whom he names as a major inspiration). In 1979, a Palliative Care Unit (PCU) opened in Saint John's. Shortly after, Dr. Eaton became involved, and he has run the PCU and a formal Palliative Care service since the early 1980s. For most of his career he also ran a general family medicine practice, but in the last 5 years he has concentrated full time on Palliative Care. He is keenly interested in Palliative Care in non-cancer progressive diseases such as dementia and diabetes.

Dr. Eaton's passion for Palliative Care stems from his love of helping and supporting vulnerable people through very difficult times. He has a strong belief in being honest with patients, and says, "when it's raining there's no advantage in telling everyone that the sun is shining." He respects his colleagues a great deal, and looks up to his patients and their families. He has learned from patients that they appreciate the truth and a good sensible plan. One of his colleagues describes him as an "unsung hero who has toiled in the trenches for decades" and describes his love for patients which is manifest in his willingness to help out. For ten years Dr. Eaton conducted weekly grief counseling at his Family Medicine office, before a formal grief counseling service was set up.

Aside from his clinical career, he is an associate professor at the faculty of medicine at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN). He is currently on sabbatical and spends half of his time doing formal teaching. Dr. Eaton has a passion for teaching both medical students and Family Medicine residents about communication and clinical skills in palliative care. He has developed a series of palliative medicine lectures and clinical cases for standardized patients. He uses video-review in cooperation with his trainees to enhance their interview skills. Dr. Eaton has been working hard to increase Palliative Care services in St. John's and has developed a program that hires Family Physicians who collaborate to run palliative care clinics and take on "orphan" patients. He is now working to develop after-hours physician call coverage for palliative care patients. He was recently presented with an award from the MUN, which was named in his honour (The Bill Eaton Family Medicine Humanities Award). His wish for the future is to see physicians better trained in Palliative Care, and improved Palliative Care for patients on general medical and surgery wards.

Dr. Eaton is in a Rock and Roll Band, which he describes as, "old guys getting together to play music." He enjoys swimming and hiking, and is currently reading Ken Follet's The Century Trilogy. Comedy is a big part of his life, and for many years he engaged in after-dinner entertainment. Combining his love for music and comedy, he composes

witty songs about every occasion, and has even made a few CDs. A website called Humourologist (www.humourologist.com) features a sample of his original songs and articles. Dr. Eaton developed a lecture on the use of humor and laughter in medicine, which he has presented in every province in Canada multiple times. He has been a keynote speaker for the College of Family Physicians on several occasions. For decades he has written a column in MUNMED, the faculty of medicine newsletter, “poking fun at the antics of doctors.” He plans to write a book of 100 funny “Rules for Young Doctors” which he has been compiling.

Dr. Eaton has practiced as a doctor for 40 years. By his 25th birthday he was married, had a child and a medical practice. He has faced difficult times in his personal life. He experienced a full hemiplegic stroke and had a 100% recovery after emergency administration of tPA. He cared for his father-in-law, who died of Alzheimer’s disease, and spent four weeks caring for his wife, Norma, who recently died of breast cancer. Because Norma declined all chemotherapy when cancer recurred in her liver, she was well until her last month. He recalls her last 18 months as a time of great closeness between them. Dr. Eaton has seven children: 4 of his own, two step-children, and one step-step child, as well as four grandchildren who bring him great joy.

It is clear why Dr. Eaton was chosen as our first local hero. He is a well-rounded individual who has focused his career on the improvement and advancement of Palliative Care. He is devoted to his family and to the greater family of humanity. His passion for the field, his sense of humour, his compassion for patients and his dedication to a greater cause has made him the hero that he is. I can imagine his presence in palliative care as one of brightness and laughter and can imagine any patients’ good fortune to have him at their bedside.

Dr. Saneea Abboud