



Power of Women in Family Practise

It was in the late 70s when Debra Boyce was inspired listening to Dr. Joyce Barret of Peterborough deliver a presentation to an eager group of students at Thomas A. Stewart. Followed by the encouragement of her trusted teachers to follow a career in science or medicine, she went on to pursue her medical degree at the University of Toronto in 1988 and start a family practise in her hometown of Peterborough.

“After graduation from U of T I did my residency in Family Medicine in Ottawa,” says Dr. Boyce. “My husband had secured a job in

Peterborough and so I returned home after my residency. I filled in for other family doctors for a few months and then started a shared practice with Dr. Barbara Gow. We were soon joined by Dr. Sheila Alexander and we had a busy family practice with primary care obstetrics. We also had our own children in those first few years – 12 children! – between the doctors and our staff! My husband also worked shifts and nights and when I look back on those busy times with small children it was occasionally frantic. When PRHC administration created the medical director positions I took on the position for Women and Children’s Services for several years and worked with a terrific team there, too. I continued to serve on various committees and take on project work at the hospital, Hospice Peterborough and my children’s schools. Family physicians were facing greater and greater challenges meeting the needs of the community, people without family doctors and the growing complexity of medical problems. Some of us began to meet and talk about how healthcare in Ontario needed to evolve. I was there when Dr. Don Harterre, the first Physician Lead of the Peterborough Family Health Team, said ‘pigs would fly’ when family doctors would be supported to work in teams but the evolution of the Family Health Teams was just around the corner.”

The Peterborough Family Health Team understood some of the challenges the family physicians with a heavy practise of delivering babies would face and they immediately worked with those physicians to speak with the Ministry of Health. Through this process they also spoke of improving patient care and bringing the multidisciplinary approach to obstetrics with the added expertise and skills of social workers, nurses, lactation consultants, dietitians and others. It all came together to form the Partners in Pregnancy Clinic in 2008.

“One of the strengths of our PIPC team is that we have continued to develop and create new services and programs as medicine changes and we see unmet needs,” says Dr. Boyce. “Each of our professionals have learned new skills and

pursued training or learning to offer more to the women that we see. We have developed a website that we use to share that information with women and with other care providers. So we now have special care plans for women and families with miscarriage and loss, addictions, mental health issues and for young moms. We have a food and clothing cupboard. We work to support the Peterborough Butterfly Run and their important work. All of the PIPC physicians also volunteer for hospital or community committees and working groups, sharing our expertise in many areas.”

Following the process that resulted in the creation of the Partners in Pregnancy Clinic, Dr. Boyce was nominated for election to a position on the Council (Board of Directors) of the Canadian Medical Protective Association by one of the Ministry consultants. Virtually all Canadian physicians are members of the CMPA and rely on the advice and educational offerings to improve patient and health system safety, but Dr. Boyce was not really aware of the complexity of the corporation or of governance work. The ten years that she has spent on Council have been fascinating- a challenge with a steep learning curve about safety science, the medical legal system, business, finance and so much more. With the support of the Partners in Pregnancy team she has also been able to work on and speak about provincial projects in maternity care - like the new Ontario Antenatal Record used by all obstetrical providers, and the Omama website and app.

“Women are capable of so much and they want to be the best parent that they can be,” says Dr. Boyce. “I truly believe that and I love to see them thrive at this.”

Outside of a busy career, along with her 2 adult children, Dr. Boyce and her husband have achieved their scuba certification, so now they travel to dive. Grant Gilbert, her husband, has retired from the Peterborough Fire Services and now that their children, Garrett and Rhiannon, have graduated from university, they are enjoying more time together and flexibility to travel.

“Except for the 10 years that I was in university I have always lived in the Peterborough area. I love the Peterborough connections and family ties- the threads that connect us all in some way. When I deliver a baby and meet grandparents, they are likely to ask me about my family or how I might be related to them or someone they know. They get excited when they learn that their nurse at PRHC labour and delivery is my sister! Even as Peterborough grows those community and family ties are cherished.”