

Life is precious, fragile, and resilient! It can change in a moment. The upside is that you can recover and return to good health with the quick response of an ambulance, treatment, the support of a skilled medical team and self-care. It takes more than one person to save a life, it requires teamwork.

I am Dr. Alexander (Sandy) Banks. My life decision to become a medical Doctor was the right choice for me. This is my story, from my perspective as a northern Doctor working alongside nurses, nursing aides, and medical team players stationed in and around the remote community of The Pas and area. Much has changed and evolved since I first arrived in The Pas in 1970.

Each of us have our own life journey to travel. My life has been filled with abundance, adventure, good people, good times, long work hours and a major commitment to saving others' lives. Although there has been struggles along the way, I have had the pleasure of meeting and working with other talented and professional groups of people, some within my field and others outside. We are 600 kilometers away from lifesaving services that are available in major centers. Together we have been able to influence and convince provincial leaders to support medical services necessary for the north.

Going back to my roots, I was born in the U.K. in the middle of Scotland. My father was a physician, referred to as Dr. Sunshine by his patients. He influenced me with his caring nature to become a doctor. At the age of 19, I attended medical school at the University at Edinburgh. I graduated in 1967, then spent an additional three years studying anesthesia, obstetrics, and pediatrics.

Travelling back in time to the 60's, a group of Doctors was tending to the medical needs of people living in The Pas and northern Manitoba. These doctors were Dr. Cotton, Dr. Walton, and Dr. Tack. They ran the clinic, worked at St. Anthony's hospital, and served nursing stations in Snow Lake, Gillam, Norway House, Shamattawa, Brochet and Split Lake. An additional responsibility was the recruitment of physicians for this area. In 1969, they posted an advertisement in the British Medical Journal asking for doctors who were "able, affable, and available". If so, "We need you in The Pas, Manitoba!"

Being intrigued by the tone of the ad and wanting to advance my skills in anesthesia I believed that I might be the right person for the job. It was difficult financially to make a living as a doctor in the U.K, so it was more appealing to work as a Doctor in Canada. I was curious about the hospital and the position and wrote to find out what type of equipment they were using. I never heard back, but by this time, I was already on my way to meet the people that I would be working with for the remainder of my career. I accepted and moved to The Pas, Manitoba, Canada. A fresh young doctor from Scotland moving to practice medicine.

I was under the impression that Canada had state of the art ventilators and thought that I was coming to a country with top notch equipment. When I arrived, I was shown the operating room with ventilators older than the ones back in the UK. I was surprised at the age of the equipment and asked, "Where are the ventilators?" Someone pointed to two tiny Philippino nurses (Lou & Letty) standing near the back of the operating room. These two ladies were exceptional nurses, manually pumping the ventilator during surgery to breathe for the patients to keep them alive.

In the late 60's, there was a shortage of nurses in the province of Manitoba. The provincial government recruited nurses from the Philippines with Lou Howes and Letty Carbonell arriving in 1968. Pinky Cruz, Phoebe Tubiera, Laura Gajudo and Jose Porter were four of many Philippino nurses arriving on the scene in the early 70's to fill the nursing shortage In The Pas. These nurses helped to make a huge difference

to the quality of life for others in the community, at a time when nurses were not in abundance. They uprooted from their families, moved to this country, and became a part of the team that treated patients, nursing them back to health.

My arrival to The Pas stays fresh in my mind. In April 1970, I took a morning flight from Winnipeg on Trans Air. I recall conversations at the airport about my decision on moving to The Pas to work. Prior to departure, strangers questioned me about moving to The Pas. "Why??" they asked. Once on the flight, to my surprise a passenger nearby ordered beer as a breakfast beverage. This seemed strange to me, but the flight attendant served up his request. There was no stopping him until he filled the sick bags provided on board. Welcome to The Pas, Manitoba. I then too started to wonder, where the hell am I going?

Upon landing on the tarmac at the airport, I was greeted by Dennis Koss who was the clinic manager in the 70's. Dennis was determined to drive me to the local bank to acquire a loan for a vehicle. I was feeling a little uncertain as I had never borrowed any money. Upon securing the loan, Dennis drove me to Twin Motors to buy a vehicle. Together, they convinced me to buy a big Chrysler. I spent the night feeling sick to my stomach, as I had never borrowed this much money before and I did not want a big boat for a car. The next morning, I returned the car for a smaller sportier vehicle called a Dodge Swinger, which suited my fancy much better.

My first night sleep was at the Golden Arrow motel. Hockey night in Canada was playing on television with Bobby Orr starring in the game. Prior to that evening, I had never watched a hockey game. I remember Bobby Orr soaring through the air to score the winning goal in overtime. It was spectacular! I was in awe of hockey, especially Bobby Orr bringing the first Stanley Cup to the Boston Bruins. I was hooked and have been a hockey fan ever since. I experienced so many firsts in that first week.

In the 70's, medical practices were vastly different from today. We provided services to other northern communities and nursing stations such as Nelson House, Shamattawa, Split Lake, South Indian Lake, Gillam, Snow Lake, Lynn Lake and Brochet. It was a vast amount of territory to cover. We would take turns rotating out for a week each month, chartering a flight with Lamb Air. For many years, each Tuesday and Thursday, the "Bay Line" would transport a train full of sick patients from these northern communities. After working a full clinic, we would attend to the hospital to admit and treat these newly arrived patients.

Each Doctor was a jack-of-all medical trades; it was expected that we cover every specialty in the hospital. We would perform minor and major surgeries and most of us delivered babies. At that time, the procedures were more invasive, with most patients having to spend extended stays in the hospital to recover. A common gallbladder surgery could have a patient in the hospital for 10 days to 2 weeks. Thankfully, due to research, advancement in medical procedures, medical innovation and infection control, patients recover quicker now spending less time in the hospital.

Around 1975, the original gang of Doctors started to move away, leaving myself, Dr. Bolton, Dr. Pinder, Dr. Skelly and Dr. Nehra to cover all of the on call. Dr. Noel joined us a few years later. We formed The Pas Clinic and covered emergency, surgical, obstetrics, pediatrics, and anesthetics. We were on-call all the time. The on-call mobile phone was the size of a briefcase. It was big and cumbersome, but we could take it in our car or boat, and we were able to contact the hospital. When the phone was used,

everyone in the north with a mobile phone could listen in on the call. There was no such thing as privacy! We had to make our calls short and sweet.

Although there are many rewards for being a physician, working from home, short work days and work weeks are not included on the list. The real world of being a doctor requires working long hours, seven days a week... sometimes 24/7. We did not stop at night. A medical career can be very demanding. For a period of two years, I was the only anesthetist on site. This was an extremely hard time for me as I was not allowed to leave the community without another qualified anesthetist to cover. It was not easy to find a replacement.

It was also during this time, that we negotiated with the government for an on-call pay schedule. Prior to this, doctors did not have a lot of control over hours worked or their pay scales. It really was the first in the province of Manitoba. Nothing like this had happened to this point. Before this, the expectations for a physician were far beyond what other professions would consider reasonable.

Vaccines have made a huge improvement to the wellness of many. In my practice, I have treated diseases that are considered unusual. Two years into my practice in The Pas, I attended a medical conference in Colorado. The keynote speaker spoke about the eradication of diphtheria and spoke about none of us having to worry about dealing with it. Really? At that point in time, I had already diagnosed and treated two babies in northern Manitoba with the disease. Thankfully, the diphtheria tetanus vaccine became more readily available for remote communities.

One of the most rewarding experiences of being a doctor is delivering a new baby into the world. When I first arrived, I was shocked at the number of babies that were lost in the first year of life. I recall thinking: "We should never lose any babies". I knew that we could do better. With changes to medical practices, vaccinations, improved delivery practices, and influencing federal and local governments, this gradually changed. Public health, educating mothers and communities on the importance of clean water, fresh milk, and good nutrition for expectant mothers were all big contributing factors to reducing infant deaths.

In 1970, St. Anthony's Hospital opened a new hospital wing which included 50 pediatric beds, designated as the second largest children's ward in Manitoba. I was assigned as the pediatric Doctor on this newly created ward which was always full or overflowing. Once a month, Dr. Briggs would come to The Pas to offer a pediatric clinic for The Pas and surrounding area. Although Dr. Briggs has passed on, he contributed greatly to the medical welfare of northern children with his service.

Joanne Wain was hired into the position of Play Therapist supporting sick children by exploring their feelings and resolving problems through various forms of play. Nancy Bown, a local artist created wonderful drawings on the walls throughout the children's ward and was involved with creating a storybook for the children. It was a feel-good environment for the children. There were a handful of registered nurses at that time, accompanied by Sisters (Nuns) and nursing aides. Doreen Duncan was one of the highly respected registered nurses who worked alongside the Sisters as patient advocates. Although the Sisters did not always have official nursing training, they took charge and at times could be overly protective of the children on the pediatric ward. I had to win over the hearts of the Sisters, especially Sister Juliette who was assigned to the children's ward.

The Sisters were extremely frugal and operated the hospital on a tight shoestring budget. They had superior standards and high expectations for all that worked at St. Anthony's Hospital. Equipment and medical supplies were precious, limited and cared for with the utmost regard. When the hospital was run by the Nuns, there was no such thing as wastefulness. An event that reflects this, goes back to my accompanying an unconscious patient into Winnipeg. There were no life flights at the time, so I flew with her into the city on a regular flight and ensured that she was settled in. The staff there told me I could go, but I knew that I could not return without the rubber endotracheal breathing tube. It was the only one we had! Today I laugh at the extent that we went to stay in the good books with the Nuns.

Northern and southern Doctors have always had a strong network of two-way communication. All our physicians trust that they can pick up the phone at any time and ask for advice. We would follow this advice and things usually went well. It is because of this bond between doctors sharing expertise, knowledge, and procedures that lives were saved.

One day a local young man was seriously injured on his job site. He was severely crushed. Somehow, we found out that there was an air force plane in Churchill. The pilot agreed to fly to The Pas, where we transported the patient to Winnipeg. The patient survived because of the support of the medical team, the fast thinking and action to connect with an outside organization willing to accommodate the request. Without this support, this patient in medical distress would not have survived his injuries. Teamwork and negotiating at its finest.

In 1980 it was becoming more apparent that the north required an air ambulance service. Prior to this if we had a patient who needed a medical life flight, Ed Schreyer, who was the Premier of Manitoba (up to 1979) offered his private plane. The Premier would allow northern physicians to fly critical patients to Winnipeg. We would dial up his private pilot and they would provide this lifesaving service. This opened up conversations about the importance of life flying patients from the north who were experiencing serious medical issues to Winnipeg for treatment. We formed an interim committee to discuss the possibility of creating this service. Committee members included: Frank Decock, Lois McMurchy, Dr. Briggs, and myself. The air ambulance with a Doctor on board for every flight became out of conversations with the Cessna plant in Wichita, Kansas. One day I called them up and asked them to fly one of their Citation Cessna Jets into the north to show the potential of this service. They agreed, flying a custom designed Cessna Citation S-2 jet to the Winnipeg airport, stopping to pick up Dr Briggs, and two Manitoba Ministers to experience first-hand the capabilities of this service. They headed north, landing in The Pas and 15 other northern communities. The air ambulance known as the Life Flight came to be in December 1985. This was a wonderful advancement for the health of northern Manitoba patients.

In 1994, I received a call from John Fondse, manager of Beaver Airways (now known as Mississippi Airways). He wanted advice on starting up a private air ambulance service. I told him, "You got to be kidding! It will cost you a fortune". He was persistent, determined and wanting to know who would be able to help him get it going. I referred two ladies to assist him with the development of the project. Chris Anderson and Gwen Miller worked with John to develop policy and procedures for a medevac. Their license for medevac was approved and is still operating today from the Grace Lake Airport. Mississippi Air Care dedicates itself to its patients and their care and all of this is made possible with the amazing team of dedicated hard-working personnel in the fields of nursing, managerial and aeronautical

professionals. Missinippi is a 100% First Nation owned airline in northern Manitoba, serving the needs of air ambulance services for the north and across Canada. It is a fantastic service.

Although I delivered many babies, in the early 80's we encountered an outcome, what some may call a miracle. Dr. Bolton had been working nights and I was coming onto the morning shift. Before ultrasound technology, Doctors relied on listening for the fetal heartbeat. A pregnant mother was in the hospital to deliver her baby. Dr. Bolton could not hear a fetal heartbeat, so he deduced that the unborn baby had succumbed. I was all set to deliver this baby, when to my relief, delight and surprise out squirted a tiny baby, alive, breathing and about the size of a small potato. "Get an incubator!", were the words out of my mouth. Looking at the lady in delivery, I thought that she was not yet finished, so we quickly rolled her into the operating room where Dr. Colin Noel, another well known physician took over. That day, Dr. Noel delivered a second, third and fourth baby, all the same size as the first one. Believe it or not, a total of 4 little ones, the size of small potatoes were born that morning. We wrapped them all in tin foil and put them into incubators for transport to Winnipeg. Government Air provided air service to pick up the newborns and deliver them to Winnipeg and Dr. Briggs met them at the airport. Four bundles of joy arrived in the world that morning. The Winnipeg Free Press reported on the quadruplets birth as front-page news.

One pride of my life, as many of my friends know, was my Alfa Romeo car, an Italian sports car with a unique design for power, speed, and fantastic handling. I have been known for my fondness for adventure and speed. One of my good-natured friends call me 007 because of my love for sports cars, and my Scottish accent. One evening I received an emergency call in to get to the hospital STAT in the middle of the night. This was the perfect excuse to put my foot flat to the floor driving my Alfa Romeo heading directly to the hospital. My home was located at the far end of Clearwater lake. My wild side called to me, so I put on my 4-way flashers, headlights and gunned it. In 15 minutes, I was at the weigh scale, and noticed an RCMP Panda car approaching then wheeling around. As a gesture, I hung my stethoscope outside the window to let him know that I was on an emergency call. The patrol car went flying by me with a set of handcuffs outside his window. He escorted me to the hospital, and we had a good laugh about the situation. In those days, we all knew each other. The RCMP, Doctors, lawyers, nurses, teachers, and many people working at CFI paper mill socialized with each other. We had fun times. The town was filled with young working people!

Soon after my arrival my thoughts went to building a home for myself at Clearwater Lake. I envisioned that everyone in Canada built their own cabin. One slight problem was that I had never built anything before, but I was up for the challenge. As my good luck would have it, I was able to purchase a lot and a pre-packaged cabin together. CFI (the mill) was just starting out and locals were buying lots at Clearwater Lake, ordering pre-constructed cabins to place on their lot. I applied to the bank for another loan. This time it took a week before the bank approved my loan. It was meant to be! I had the perfect spot out at Clearwater Lake to build my cabin and enjoy my down time. I love this beautiful spot nestled in amongst nature, surrounded by my loving family, my wife (Patti) and many lifelong friends.

I have immense respect for so many people in the tri community. In my practice I saw mostly kids, but came to know so many wonderful families. After my injury, I noticed an absence in my life from not being able to treat children. I moved forward by working with First Nations, health development and physician recruitment.

I hold the people of OCN in high regard with admiration as they work towards improving the health care system on treaty lands. Not only do they tell wonderful jokes, but they are also progressive, thinking into the future for all people. They have established the Beatrice Wilson Health Authority which has moved medical standards way up the scale. They are working hard to bring additional services, Doctors, clinics, and medical services to northern Manitoba.

I loved my job practicing medicine and helping sick people return back to good health. The moment that changed everything for me goes back to my own personal accident. My decision to join my daughter on the trampoline is one event that I would change. We were having lots of fun when suddenly I crashed onto the hard ground. I told everyone I was okay, but that was my wish, not my condition. I went to bed, rising the next morning unable to speak or function. I was seriously injured. My wife Patti, realized I was extremely ill, called an ambulance and I was rushed to emergency. I had experienced major trauma to my head, was life flighted to a trauma center, and spent many months and years recovering. It was a scary time for my family. At 5 p.m. on a Friday, out of what should have been a playful time with my daughter, my life was altered. I became the patient, relying on other Doctors and medical teams to bring me back to life. After a long recovery, I knew that I had to let go of my medical practice choosing to stay involved in other ways. The accident forced me to change my profession and direction. I am thankful for the medical team and services that supported me in times of my own personal medical distress.

I often look back and reminisce about the many wonderful people that I have had the opportunity to serve, meet and work with in this community. Community has kept me here. It is a warm welcoming community. This community has been my home.

In a heartbeat, I would do it all over again. I would not change my decision to become a Doctor. It has been an incredible journey.

Make Shift Happen