

Interview with Ahmad Zbib: The New CEO of the CRA

Tell us a bit about your professional background?

The plan all along was to practice medicine, but then life happened. Right after graduating from med school and three months of internship in the ER and OR, I moved to Canada in 2003. Just like every other international medical student at the time, the road to certification and, in my case, residency, was fraught with lack of clarity, bureaucracy, expensive exams and endless discussions with people who just had nothing to offer me. Nevertheless, I decided to apply for residency in the United States. While preparing for the United States Medical Licensing Examination (USMLE), I got my first job with the Heart and Stroke Foundation. So, you can say, I have spent most of my career at mission-based organizations, during which I learned a lot and gathered skills that gave me what it takes to be interviewed here as the CEO of the CRA. I took on roles in research implementation, patient and public education, and digital health. I served on marketing leadership and strategy teams, led business development nationally and, most recently, as an executive lead for Canada's largest division at The Arthritis Society.

Can you tell us a bit about your work with The Arthritis Society (TAS)?

I started at The Society in a national role in business development – in fundraising – with responsibility for raising money primarily from corporations to help fund the mission of The Society. Shortly after my start, the Executive Director of the Ontario Division left the organization and that's when the CEO of The Arthritis Society tapped me on the shoulder and offered me the role. In that role,



I led a team of fundraisers and program managers across Ontario; I had the honour of meeting people living with arthritis and learned first hand from them about how impactful these diseases can be. I was also inspired by their support of the cause to ensure that future generations stand a better chance at finding a cure.

You previously studied medicine, what initially drew you to a career in medicine?

As cliché as this may sound, I have always wanted to be a medical doctor – minus the phase when I almost gave my parents a heart attack when I declared I wanted to be a DJ. As far as

I recall, I have always been fascinated by biology and being able to leverage my knowledge to help or heal others was very appealing. Growing up, I remember chatting with my dad about setting up a weekend clinic to help those less fortunate, and that was a great incentive for me to apply to med school.

Can you name a person or a mentor who has inspired you professionally?

I learned from my dad that you should always give more than you expect to receive, and this has always been a guiding principle for me professionally in every job I have had. I have learned from my mom that things happen for a reason and, if you just wait long enough, you will realize that a better option is around the corner. I had a few bosses who invested their time and resources in me, and that has shaped the person I am today.

What do you hope to bring to the CRA as CEO?

An almost obsessive attention to the wants and needs of our

current and future members, along with operational excellence, innovation and financial sustainability.

What have been the most rewarding aspects of this new role so far, and what have been the most challenging aspects?

Most rewarding is working with volunteers who are dedicated to the mission of this organization. Most challenging. . . working from home where you just never leave the office.

What do you foresee as challenges to Canadian rheumatologists in the future? What can individual rheumatologists and the CRA do to help meet these challenges?

One of the biggest challenges I anticipate is a growing population without an increase in the number of rheumatology training spots. Add to that the fact that within the next 5-10 years, 30% of rheumatologists will be at retiring age. This will amplify the shortage of rheumatologists and, in turn, put a higher burden on already busy practices, which will only lead to increasing wait times for patients.

The CRA is already supporting multiple projects in models of care, which has the potential to alleviate this pressure. Furthermore, we are working on highlighting regional

variations in access to rheumatologists; facilitating the discussion between trainees and community rheumatologists practicing in rural and underserved areas is another focus of ours.

If you had an extra hour in the day, how would you spend it?

Goofing around with my kids.

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of these MAiD cases is not that rheumatologists will necessarily be much more involved in future MAiD cases, but that we may have to do better at examining the suffering wrought by rheumatic diseases from the perspective of our patients.^{4,5}

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The CRA has launched a new and improved, mobile-friendly and easy-to-navigate website. See it here: www.rheum.ca