

B.C. Society of Rheumatologists (BCSR) – Update from the Pacific

By Jason Kur, MD, FRCPC

2024 was a year for growth and change in British Columbia (BC) Rheumatology. Our society continues to build momentum and lead system change.

As it stands, we are nearing 100 practicing rheumatologists in the province. This number is still not enough to meet the demands of the population, but a significant improvement from the 54 rheumatologists (32 full-time equivalents) that were documented in 2010. Like many specialties, we struggle with disparities in access to rheumatology care based on geography. However, there has been support and innovation from the University of British Columbia (UBC) Division of Rheumatology. Rheumatology trainees will now experience rotations in either Nanaimo or Kelowna, in a renewed effort to expose more trainees to different regions of the province and practice environments, not to mention different beaches and skiing.

Politically, BC has been a hotbed of activity. In October we had a nailbiter provincial election that seems to have returned the NDP government to office pending recounts. Why is this important? The Doctors of BC is beginning to renegotiate the Physician Master Agreement, with messaging directed to a renewed focus on specialist issues. After the implementation of the longitudinal family practice payment model, specialist sentiment for change is on the rise; access to specialty care and specialist issues must be a major focus of negotiations and system change.

BC rheumatology has been an early adopter of specialty change. After a 14-year journey starting in 2010, when we applied for disparity funding for a nursing team model of care, a complex time-based fee code, and our immunosuppressant review tool, the BCSR was elated to report that the provisional status of our fee codes has been removed. After years of painstaking monitoring and review, these codes have been incorporated into the general fee guide. This gives rheumatologists more certainty in their practice decisions and also aids with reciprocal billing for patients

from the Yukon and Alberta, many of whom seek specialty care in BC due to geographic proximity.

In addition to the annual Western Alliance of Rheumatology meeting hosted in Kelowna in spring, the 19th annual British Columbia Rheumatology Invitational Education Series (BRIESE) conference took place in September in Vancouver. We had another successful year with enriched learnings from Dr. Atul Deodhar (Oregon), Dr. Sarah Hansen (UBC), Dr. Angela Hu (UBC), and Dr. Hani El-Gabalawy (Manitoba). The conference also included an ultrasound program and the return of an allied health component for nurses.

At the BRIESE gala, we took the opportunity to praise some of our finest with the Annual BCSR/UBC Award presentations. The Innovation Award was jointly awarded to Dr. Raheem B. Kherani and Dr. James Yeung. Drs. Kherani and Yeung have been integral in the creation and support of a fracture liaison service at Richmond General Hospital (one of the few such programs in BC). They have been vocal members of the BC Coalition of Osteoporosis Physicians that has been organizing to improve access to osteoporosis care and treatment. In a short time, they have had a large impact both locally and provincially on these cross-specialty initiatives. Dr. Mo Bardi was awarded the UBC BCSR Teaching Award for outstanding contributions to the medical training program. Dr. Bardi has been an early Canadian leader in rheumatology ultrasound and has been eagerly transmitting that knowledge to the next waves of learners. Finally, Dr. Kam Shojania received the Advocacy Award. His work as a BC rheumatologist leader has been unparalleled and has included time as Program Director, UBC Rheumatology Division Head, and as an advocate for specialist clinics, including the joint rheumatology/dermatology DART clinic at St Paul's Hospital. Our rheumatology community has greatly benefited from his inclusive vision.

Once again, in this time of reflection, we want to honour the contributions of other pillars of the BC rheumatology community who retired recently. Dr. Jackie Stewart of Penticton and Dr. Nancy Hudson from Kamloops are recent retirees. They both have skillfully cared for patients in the BC Interior, and their impact on care will be hard to replicate.

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From left to right: Drs. James Yeung, Raheem Kherani, Annie Colwill, Kam Shojania and Mo Bardi.