

DISCOVERING COMMUNITY AND PURPOSE IN RURAL MEDICINE

DR. TRISTAN BROWNRIGG SHARES HIS JOURNEY AS AN EAST KOOTENAY LOCUM



Dr. Tristan Brownrigg camping in the Bugaboos, Purcell Mountains, southeast British Columbia.

Dr. Tristan Brownrigg's path to rural family medicine was driven by a desire for connection with the communities he serves and the natural world surrounding them.

Growing up with a father in the Air Force meant moving frequently, which instilled in Tristan a deep appreciation for small-town life and a longing to eventually grow roots. After completing medical school at the University of Toronto and a residency in the Peterborough-Kawartha program at Queen's University, where he gained valuable experience honing his rural and emerge skills in a large and bustling hospital, Tristan decided to pursue a career in rural family medicine.

"I love rural medicine because I enjoy doing everything—family medicine, emergency care, and even a bit of hospitalist work," said Tristan. "It's also rewarding to have that longitudinal experience, where you see people in different contexts over time; I like that continuity of care."

In August, 2023, Tristan and his partner, Sydney Carmichael, an optometrist, left their home base of Ontario with intentions for Tristen to locum his way across B.C. in search of an eventual home. This led them to the communities of Golden and Fernie, and although Tristan planned to locum only a few months in the area, he quickly fell for the region.

"Golden and Fernie both have so much to offer," Tristan said. "The sense of community is strong, and you really feel like you can make an impact here."

Their time in Golden and Fernie isn't just about work. The couple is drawn to the proximity and vastness of their natural mountain surroundings, enjoys exploring the regional outdoor activities, from hiking to snowboarding, and appreciates the slower pace of rural life combined with the diversity of professional opportunities.

“One of my professional passions is wilderness and expedition medicine. I would eventually love to get involved as a medical director or expand my practice with wilderness groups, ski hills, search and rescue teams, or national/provincial parks,” said Tristan. “Being in a smaller mountain community opens these opportunities. I’m in a pretty sweet spot in the world right now, and while I’m here to work, I’m also here to live. Being in the East Koots in the winter, I’d snowboard in the morning and then head to the clinic in the afternoon, with the hill still in sight. It’s amazing.”

As they continue to split their time between Golden and Fernie, Tristan and Sydney are carefully considering their long-term home. For Tristan, locuming has allowed him to explore landscapes, lifestyle, and build connections, both personal and professional. It’s also provided opportunities to learn how different clinics operate, how local doctors work together to meet the healthcare needs of their community, and to explore his role within this healthcare system while continuously building skills and knowledge.

Tristan also credits recent changes in B.C.’s healthcare system, particularly the introduction of the Longitudinal Family Practice (LFP) model, for bringing him to B.C. in the first place. This new approach to family medicine not only simplified billing but also recognized the importance of indirect work, such as paperwork and referrals.

“B.C.’s new family medicine model was a game-changer,” Tristan notes. “Policy matters. It showed me B.C. values the hard work family doctors do, making it an attractive place to build my career. During residency, amidst the growing family medicine crisis, there was so much talk about family doctors and communities in crisis. But arriving in B.C., for the first time in a long time, I felt a positive shift and optimism about the future. Practicing feels sustainable.”

Tristan’s story touches on the joys, challenges, and opportunities of rural medicine. And it reminds us that while many of us seek a destination, it’s just as important to enjoy the journey.

“Locuming in the East Kootenay – the medical community has been very supportive,” said Tristan. “The first five years of your career can be terrifying—you’re holding on to the edge of your seat as you hit the hard wall of reality. But everyone here has been so friendly and encouraging. We’ve been warmly welcomed by our colleagues and community, we’ve immersed ourselves in the mountain culture, and we can see why people love to live here and build their practice here.”

If you are a family physician interested in learning more about locum opportunities in the East Kootenay, or know of a locum interested in the area, please contact Karrie Kelleher, Recruitment Coordinator, East Kootenay Division of Family Practice at kkelleher@ekdivision.ca.



East Kootenay
Division of Family Practice
An FPSC initiative