

Inuit physician aims to inspire

Barbara Sibbald

As a child, Canada's only female Inuit physician built igloos in her backyard and listened to her father's stories about traditional life in Labrador, but Danika Edmunds had to go to medical school in Alberta to really discover her roots.

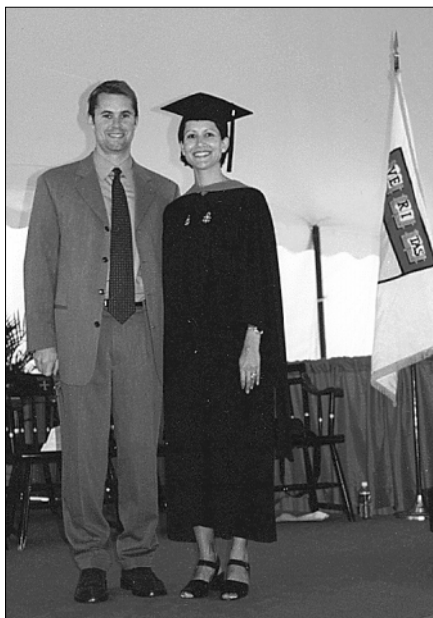
Edmunds is among the 20 Aboriginal physicians who have graduated through the University of Alberta's Aboriginal Health Careers Program. Although she was accepted at 3 Canadian medical schools, she chose Alberta because of its program and became an enthusiastic spokesperson. "It raised my consciousness about my heritage," she says, "and was a significant turning point." Although she was the only Inuit there — there are only 2 Inuit physicians in Canada — for the first time Edmunds had Aboriginal friends and mentors, and a real opportunity to learn about the culture.

Edmunds was born and raised in Cornerbrook, Nfld., but her Inuit father was brought up in Hopedale, Labrador, a small coastal community where he lived a traditional life until leaving to attend boarding school. He ended up becoming an engineer and eventually married a Newfoundlander. "He is my most influential role model," she says. "I was always very much aware of his cultural background and the challenges he faced in pursuing and achieving his career."

Edmunds, who has visited Hopedale several times and learned something of her cultural background, set her sights on becoming a physician while in junior high. At the U of A she surprised herself by being able to meld health with her Aboriginal heritage — something she hadn't even considered when she entered medicine. "There's a great need for Aboriginal health care workers, especially physicians, in Canada," she says. The ratio of Aboriginal physicians to that population is 1:30 000; the ratio of physicians to Canadians generally is about 1:600.

"I'd like to work at the broader level, on population-based health care and how that can be improved," she says. "We need these macro changes before the micro. We need to increase the ability for change and for health care provision at the hands-on level. We need [the right] environments, money, personnel. . . ."

Edmunds, 30, hopes to take her place in health care administration at the policy-making level. "I enjoyed my family medicine residency [at the U of A] but I couldn't see myself being fulfilled with that type of practice. I want to improve Aboriginal health care and address their problems."



New grad: Dr. Danika Edmunds and husband, Dr. Robert Wood

One of the biggest challenges for the Aboriginal population is isolation and lack of access to adequate health care. Edmunds isn't sure what the solution is, but she knows that there are "definitely ways to look at improving [the system]."

In preparation for her career, she received a scholarship to Harvard University, where she earned a master's degree in public health, specializing in health care management. She's now completing a newly developed management fellowship at the Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. She spent the year in the radiology department, which was restructuring and faced numerous management issues.

It provided hands-on experience in health care management, as opposed to the usual clinical fellowships — something like an MBA for physicians. At the same time, she recently wrapped up a 3-year stint on a pharmacology and therapeutics committee for Health Canada's Medical Services Branch, where she provided practical advice on drug benefits and therapeutic issues to 6 federal departments.

She's not sure what comes after the fellowship. Her Canadian husband, Dr. Robert Wood, is an orthopedic surgeon completing a fellowship in Houston. They would like to settle near home, and are looking for jobs in Eastern Canada. But they may end up staying in the US for a few years to gain experience.

Whatever the case, Edmunds is sticking to her goal of having a broader influence. And that includes helping to influence other Aboriginals to enter medicine. She is appearing in a TV program about Aboriginal role models in health careers that will be aired later this year.

Meanwhile, her cousins back in Hopedale, Labrador, recognized Edmunds' photo on a poster for the Aboriginal Health Careers Program. "They were really proud of me," she says. "Maybe I can inspire them." ?