

Heart and Soul

Gens de cœur

St. John's MD as busy outside medicine as in

Beth Ryan

There's not an empty space in Dr. Linda Inkpen's datebook. The days are mapped out for months on end, blocked off with appointments at her busy general practice, board meetings, business trips and community events. That jam-packed schedule would leave many people feeling overwhelmed, but Inkpen welcomes the frenetic pace.

"I like people, I like variety and I have a great curiosity," she says while taking a break after volunteering at the local Planned Parenthood centre in St. John's. "That's why I get so involved in my community."

Over the last 3 decades, Inkpen has been asked to add her voice to countless boards and committees both within medicine and beyond: law, science, technology, charitable organizations, the arts, politics.

"There's a great overlap between what I do as a doctor and what I do in other parts of my life," says Inkpen. "I don't have to separate one from the other — that's what makes it so enjoyable."

Her desire for variety is nothing new. When she headed to Memorial University in 1965 to begin undergraduate studies, she was open to the possibilities that university life had to offer. Though interested in science, Inkpen recalls, "I really wanted to sample a lot of courses and taste everything." She was active in campus activities and won numerous awards, including academic scholarships and the Miss Canada University Snow Queen Award.

Meanwhile, she spent her summers working as everything from a laboratory assistant in the math department to an airline ticket agent and the host of a local CBC television show. An honours student, she completed degrees in science and education before she joined Memorial's second class of aspiring doctors in 1971. "I wanted a professional career in the sciences that involved working with people, and medical school just fell into my lap," says Inkpen.

In addition to her weekly volunteer clinic at Planned Parenthood, her current roster of activities includes chairing the board of Newfoundland Power, the province's electric company, and serving as a provincial director on the Council for Canadian Unity. This past September she was on hand to welcome medical students as they started their studies at Memorial.

The mix of activities may seem eclectic, but Inkpen says she can always find a common thread in what she's doing. "When you strip away the jargon and the issue of the day, 80% of the time it comes down to people and personal interactions," Inkpen says.



Inkpen: 25 hours a day

In 1985, she joined the province's Royal Commission on Employment and Unemployment and spent a year delving into Newfoundlanders' educational needs. "Serving on the Royal Commission was a natural stepping stone for me to get more involved in education," says Inkpen. That's when she took a 5-year break from full-time medicine to serve as the president of the Cabot College of Applied Arts and Technology. During her stint as president, she steered the college through a pivotal period in its evolution from a trades school to a centre for excellence in technology and applied arts.

Since then, Inkpen has assumed roles that require a neutral and fair-minded approach. In the 1990s she was asked to lead both an industrial inquiry into labour-relations problems at a fish plant on the province's west coast and a review of conditions at Newfoundland's youth-detention centre.

"Those were difficult issues to address, but it was helpful for me to come in from the outside and figure out what was going on and what needed to be done," she says of the 2 contentious cases, which captured the public's attention for several years.

Inkpen's varied and extensive résumé has earned her respect and recognition. In 1998, Memorial University named her Alumna of the Year and she became a member of the Order of Canada.

Despite her accomplishments in the public sphere, Inkpen always tries to balance her schedule of work and volunteer projects with the needs of her family and her own desire for private time. She reserves weekends for her husband, psychiatrist Nizar Ladha, and their 3 sons.

But in the midst of all this activity, Inkpen never forgets that she is a doctor first. "I dearly love my medical career but I don't want to do it 25 hours a day," she says. "But medicine is the core of what I do — everything else is built around that." ❓