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ASSOCIATE PHYSICIANS AT ISLAND HEALTH

Associate Physicians help to improve patient care, enhance care team cohesion, and enrich the workforce. We spoke with two Island Health Associate Physicians who shared their experience working in team-based care.

Regulated by the College of Physicians and Surgeons of BC (CPSBC), Associate Physicians (APs) hold a restricted license which allows international medical graduates, not currently eligible for full licensure, to work under the supervision of a fully licensed physician. APs are not eligible to practice independently and are employed by Island Health. Currently, there are 16 APs employed at eight Island Health sites across four program areas: emergency, perinatal, inpatient, and surgery.

Dr. Nikan Zerafatjou and Dr. Abigail Dan-Eleberi are amongst some of the first to receive AP licensure in the province—both are now employed at Island Health sites. Dr. Zerafatjou works at Nanaimo Regional General Hospital (NRGH) within its surgery program; and Dr. Dan-Eleberi works alongside colleagues in emergency at Oceanside Urgent Care Centre. We caught up with both doctors to learn more about the AP role and their experience.

Dr. Nikan Zerafatjou and his wife, a radiologist, moved to Canada in 2022. Dr. Zerafatjou, who is originally from Iran, graduated from his residency program in 2020. Although hailing from Tehran, Iran's large and bustling capital, he worked as a specialist at a small community hospital—a fact that he says helped facilitate his integration at Island Health.

A trained urologist, Dr. Zerafatjou has adapted well to his role within general surgery and is emphatic about the support he has received from Island Health and his care team colleagues. “Everyone has been so kind. I have been welcomed and facilitated by everyone. From day one, I have felt comfortable.” Regarding his successful professional transition, Dr. Zerafatjou is quick to credit leaders at NRGH. “There are 10 MRPs [within general surgery] and I never have to worry about who will be working, or when. Each MRP is as patient and as supportive as the next and I really value this about my work—my colleagues are professional, but also very kind.”



Dr. Zerafatjou works rotationally—4 days on and 4 days off—and finds time to explore Vancouver Island when he's not at NRGH. “I love geography and culture, and I have been doing a lot of hiking. I love Nanaimo too. It's a close-knit community and the people are friendly here. I like the weather as well—one of the best climates in Canada, I think!”

As one of the first APs in the province, Dr. Zerafatjou is proud to help define the role, and its potential. His advice for other international medical graduates is to embrace the AP role fully—not as a steppingstone, but as a legitimate opportunity to provide care and experience professional development. “Don't think about an AP position as something temporary—that is not going to be effective for the community, or for the physician. It's important to respect the role, and to enjoy it; to be the best version of yourself to best serve the community where you work.”

Dr. Abigail Dan-Eleberi is originally from Nigeria but completed her medical training in Ghana. She moved to Canada with her two young children in March 2024, and has been working as an AP at Oceanside Urgent Care Centre since October 2024.

Like Dr. Zerafatjou, Dr. Dan-Eleberi believes that international medical graduates bring a unique and valuable perspective to the AP role. Practicing medicine in rural West Africa equipped Dr. Dan-Eleberi with the requisite skills for a busy clinic. “My experiences have taught me to improvise with limited resources for the best health outcome. I know how important it is to remain empathetic, and to build a rapport with patients and colleagues, especially when working under pressure.”



As for social and professional integration, Dr. Dan-Eleberi has high praise for her colleagues at Oceanside. “This is my first job in Canada, and I could not have wished for a better team. People are compassionate, friendly, empathetic, and smart. They are effective because of genuine teamwork.” Dr. Dan-Eleberi lives in Parksville, a small community that she says has welcomed her and her family. “Patients often come up to me in the store, or when I’m with my kids, to thank me for care they received at the centre. I’m so touched by their kindness and appreciation in these moments.” Dr. Dan-Eleberi hopes that her husband, who works as an IT specialist in Nigeria, will find work in Canada soon. In the meantime, she continues to settle into the community with their two children. “The children’s teachers are so supportive, and I’ve been welcomed by the other parents too—the community here has been awesome!”



Once onboarded, APs contribute to improved patient care and workflow efficiency within the care team. Patient flow metrics and physician feedback highlight reduced wait times, faster discharge times, strengthened care team collaboration, and improved workplace satisfaction at sites with APs. Earlier this year, a comprehensive survey of physicians, nurses, allied health workers and other key staff demonstrated the strong positive impact of the AP role on both patient care and clinical workflows within the Surgery Departments at Victoria General Hospital, Royal Jubilee Hospital, and NRGH. One physician response encapsulates the merits, and potential, of the AP role as a component of a team-based approach to healthcare: *Every aspect of surgical care has improved. Direct patient care and safety [have] improved, flow through the hospital has improved, addressing nursing needs has improved, physician workload has improved. Every aspect has improved.*

Another significant contribution APs make appertains to inclusive care; including international medical graduates as part of a care team means fostering a more diverse and inclusive workforce. Island Health is proud to include APs as integral care team members as we work together to enhance patient care and advance health outcomes in our region.

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