

Pharmacy in times of war

WORKING AS A MILITARY PHARMACIST IN KANDAHAR, AFGHANISTAN, and caring for an airfield base populated by Canadian and allied soldiers, as well as Afghan civilians, is a lot like caring for patients in a small town — although there are clearly some differences.

“We deal with diseases and illnesses that you would not deal with in Canada on a regular basis,” says Navy pharmacist Lieutenant Cory Ryan, who is posted to Kandahar, “such as malaria and some infectious diseases.”

As pharmacists in the Canadian Forces, Ryan and Captain Fritz Krauch are both working for the Canadian Forces Operation ATHENA, which is the Canadian Forces contribution to the International Security Assistance Force composed of about 2500 Canadian military personnel in Afghanistan. This is a big operation, and Ryan and Krauch support all military units in Kandahar as well as allied forces, and sometimes the Afghan National Police.

“We are currently the lead nation in Afghanistan, so pharmacy support is Canadian,” says Lieutenant-Colonel Dave Cecillon, the pharmacist who currently manages the operational requirements for Canadian Forces pharmacists. “Many allied groups don’t use pharmacists, but instead use medical technicians who have specific training.”

As members of 1 Military Medical Unit, this makes Ryan and Krauch responsible for all Canadian military personnel in Afghanistan. However, because of the allied forces and civilians, there are in excess of 10,000 people on the Kandahar Airfield alone that they may care for at any given time. Working in this environment, Ryan says, has 2 benefits. “Our continued maintenance of clinical skills, as well as military training, is put to use in this environment.”

While a military pharmacist’s clinical skills are important, his

or her military skills carry equal weight, because these pharmacists are, after all, soldiers first. In addition to the dispensing of drugs, resolving complex drug-related problems, and collaborating with other health care professionals, military pharmacists also have to meet their operational roles in both peace time and in times of war. According to the Canadian Armed Forces Recruiting website, they have to be well versed in the treatment of battlefield injuries and disease. They must also be knowledgeable in the “drug therapy aspects of emergency medicine, intensive care therapy, pain management, infectious diseases, and medical countermeasures for nuclear, biological, and chemical warfare.” In addition, pharmacists manage the medical supply system for the Canadian Forces. It may seem like a lot for only 2 pharmacists to handle for one base, but their duties are clearly defined, and they have experienced medical technicians to



Navy pharmacist Lieutenant Cory Ryan assists an Afghan National Army soldier with a prescription during his rounds at the Kandahar Airfield in Afghanistan.

help them.

Krauch is the officer in charge of Kandahar’s Forward Medical Equipment Depot, while Ryan is the clinical pharmacist and general safety officer for the medical unit. Krauch is responsible for seeing that the hospital and various Canadian medical units in the field are well supplied with drugs and medical supplies. This includes making sure that there are fully fitted medical kits ready for soldiers to bring with them during dangerous field operations.

“We carry essentially the same medications you would find in a community pharmacy, as well as supplies typically found only in hospitals,” Krauch explains. “My main job is to ensure I have sufficient quantity of supplies on hand of the correct type, and to ensure they are distributed on time.”

While Krauch keeps up with supply demands, a position usually reserved for a senior-ranking pharmacist, Ryan assumes the role of community and hospital pharmacist. “My morning starts with reviewing patient charts and preparing for rounds,” he says, opening the pharmacy at 8:30 a.m. and commencing rounds at 9 a.m., while a technician tends to the pharmacy. After rounds, the rest of Ryan’s morning is mostly spent in outpatient dispensing, as well as answering queries from the ward and the hospital’s intensive care unit. His afternoon is busy with tasks like outpatient prescriptions, ward discharges, and prepackaging medications for night cupboards. In addition, Ryan is always on call for emergencies.

“During times of mass casualties I go between the trauma bays, ensuring they have enough medications, as well as being available for questions regarding medications.”

Ryan and Krauch have to deal with treatments for chronic conditions as well. Because soldiers work in difficult terrain, musculoskeletal injuries are common. And because they live in close quarters, respiratory illnesses and sinusitis occur frequently as well. However, Krauch says chronic illness is kept to a minimum with a rigorous medical screening process in place for military personnel before they can head overseas. “Those who have pre-



As the senior-ranking pharmacist at the Kandahar Airfield, Captain Fritz Krauch is in charge of the Forward Medical Equipment Depot.

existing conditions are advised to bring their meds with them,” Krauch says. “Re-supply here takes somewhat longer than when in Canada.”

With such a busy schedule and demanding hours, these pharmacists also have to deal with working in a new climate — one where the temperature can hit 50 degrees Celsius in the summer, and the air and landscape is dusty and dry. Despite the climate and environment, though, Krauch says most of the stress he experiences in Afghanistan is work-related. He is faced with the pressure of ensuring that life-saving drugs and medical supplies, which can take weeks to arrive from Canada, are always in supply.

“I carry a great many items that are directly related to mitigating injuries or saving lives,” he explains. “The thought of running out of something that could result in dire consequences for another human is my great concern.”

Canadian Forces pharmacy today

- Many allied groups in Afghanistan do not use pharmacists, but instead use medical technicians who have specific training.
- Canadian Forces pharmacists are deployed to Afghanistan for a period of 6 months. They should not re-deploy within 12 months because of job-related stress and strain.
- There are only 28 regular force pharmacists in the Canadian Forces, 2 of whom are currently completing their PharmD degrees. The bulk of in-Canada military requirements are therefore filled by civilian pharmacists, about 49 in total.
- The Canadian Armed Forces is looking for pharmacists — they need at

least 22 more. For more information on working as a pharmacist for the Canadian Armed Forces, see www.forces.ca/v3/engraph/jobs/jobs.aspx?id=54&bhcp=1 or contact Captain Jack MacFarlane with recruiting at 416-937-4884 or by e-mail at MacFarlane.AJ@forces.gc.ca.

Like Krauch, Ryan says that even though he is away from home and learning to live in a foreign climate, his stress also originates mainly from work. "Most of the stress comes from seeing the casualties of war and all of the human tragedy and suffering that goes on," Ryan says. "Seeing children injured is an especially stressful situation."

Although Krauch and Ryan consider themselves fortunate in that they don't have to leave the base to dispense medication, the threat of an occasional mortar or rocket attack is always a reality. Despite the challenges that come with working in Afghanistan, however, Ryan says that doing this job has offered him a new perspective.

"There are so many little things in our daily life at home that we worry about, but when you look at what the people of this country deal with on a daily basis, our worries become meaningless," he says.

For Krauch, the ramp ceremonies honouring deceased Canadian soldiers have made him reflect seriously on the high price that soldiers and their families and friends are asked to pay because of their military duty. "Most [deceased soldiers] are much younger than me and have only lived a portion of their lives," he says.

Krauch also says that working with injured people and children, as well as casualties, has made him value his life in Canada. "Material wealth is much more of a relative thing considering how poor the people here are," he says. "I also find it difficult to get too concerned when I hear of the dire state of our medical services in Canada after comparing it to what the people here have." ■

Dana Graham Lai is the editorial and production coordinator of the Canadian Pharmacists Journal.



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