



# The path less travelled

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WHEN TRINA NGUYEN ACCEPTED A POSITION as pharmacist at Surrey Memorial Hospital in 2006, she was definitely choosing the path less travelled ... at least, less travelled by recent graduates of university pharmacy programs.

-Less than 10 per cent of pharmacy graduates go into hospitals. We are not trained for this in school; we are trained to work as retail pharmacists," says Nguyen. -I was only introduced to hospital work in my final year of school; by then most students had signed contracts with retail outlets."

It was lucky for Nguyen, who was finishing up a five-year program at the University of Manitoba, that she hadn't yet committed elsewhere.

-All of a sudden I fell in love with hospital work," she says. -I love that every day we do something to help patients. We feel very involved in the patients health and have a very good and active relationship with doctors and nurses. We look at the whole clinical picture. Alongside the doctors we look at the blood work. Also there are IV antibiotics which have to be dosed according to the patients weight and size, the function of their kidneys and other issues and that is where we are asked all the time to make sure the patients have the right doses."

Being part of a hospital environment is hugely different than being part of a retail culture, something that was brought home to Nguyen in her initial training, which was particularly extensive due to the fact that, as she says, her education focused on retail settings. Also, at the time, there was a shortage of pharmacists, so Surrey Memorial allowed Nguyen, along with six other pharmacy graduates, to skip their residency requirement and get trained on the job.

-They really needed us and were well prepared to train us. We had three months of training ... rotating around, getting oriented to the whole hospital experience, learning how the wards function, what the doctors do, what nurses do •they even took us to the lab to show us what those bugs look like," says Nguyen.

Nguyen found the experience fascinating ... and things haven't got any less interesting since then. -I love my work because I am always learning something new. Its busy; its challenging and it keeps you very invigorated every single day."

She also appreciates having expertise that she can share where it is needed.

-Often, drugs are something that people take, but they don't fully understand what they do," she says. For instance, they might not know about potential side effects, or they might not be able to recognize when they are taking duplicate drugs.

-I can help people by educating and informing them about medications," says Nguyen. -I really enjoy teaching." She observes that this seems to be a character trait shared by most, if not all, pharmacists.

-We enjoy informing the public about medication and making sure everyone is on the right medication, so no one should ever feel reluctant to ask a pharmacist a question."

Nguyen's love of informing and educating people finds another outlet in her involvement with HSA ... although it was mainly her desire to be educated that drew her in.

-I decided to be a union steward about a year-and-a-half ago because there were no pharmacist stewards and I

thought, "We work really hard and pay union dues and don't know much about what the union does.

-One of the first things I did was go to a workshop and learn what HSA does and what everyone should know as a member. Since then I've got about six more pharmacists to be union stewards. It's really good that we know our collective agreements and the correct terms and conditions of our contracts."

As part of her union role, Nguyen attends a new staff orientation held by the hospital once a month. Usually about a quarter of the new staff in any given month are HSA members, so Nguyen introduces herself, explains what HSA does, presents the main points of the collective agreement, and makes sure they know who to contact with any questions.

-As soon as they start working, they start paying union dues, so it's important that they know what the union is for and that it isn't just a meaningless number being taken off their paycheque."

This is a particularly difficult time for health care professionals, says Nguyen. -There is a big recession going on and the budget is very frustrating. I know that every single person working at the hospital is probably working at their maximum potential right now. And we are all fearful about whether or not we'll have a job a few months down the line. It's not a good time and a lot of people are stressed. So it's good the union is there to clarify procedures."

Regardless of these stresses, Nguyen's enthusiasm for her work is palpable, and shows no signs of flagging. She is totally happy with what she does, and when she looks at the future she sees an intriguing and varied array of possibilities to keep her engaged for decades.

-Right now I'd say I'm pretty young in my career ... I've only been working four years. I'll probably be working another 30 years and I want to be able to experience everything. One day maybe I'd like to be a clinical specialist; it's one of the highest levels you can be as a pharmacist. I've also always wanted to own my own pharmacy so maybe in the long term I can do that too."

Clearly, Nguyen's path-less-travelled can lead her to many others, equally interesting and rewarding, in a career that promises to keep her engaged every single day. 

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