

Testimony from Caleb Swanberg in Support of LD 273
An Act to Continue the Doctors for Maine's Future Scholarship Program
Tuesday, February 23, 2021
Committee on Innovation, Development, Economic Advancement and Business

Senator Curry, Representative Roberts and distinguished members of the IDEA Committee, my name is Caleb Swanberg and I am speaking today in strong support of LD 273, the Doctors for Maine's Future Scholarship Program.

I am an Aroostook County native, a Tufts-Maine Track alumnus, and now an attending family physician at Pines Health Services in Caribou. There is no doubt that the excellent training, unique culture, and financial assistance I was lucky enough to receive at the Maine Track was what made my return home possible.

A few months into my medical practice in Caribou, I met an elderly and endearingly obstinate woman, Mrs. M. She was plagued only by two problems - debilitating dizziness, and a broken primary care system. For years, different physicians had taken perfectly reasonable stabs at diagnosing a cause for her dizziness. All had been dead ends. As years passed and doctors moved on, her symptoms progressed, and she lost her independence.

At our first visit, I promised to hear her story from the beginning, and that I was here to stay. She had been taking a drug called Nortriptyline – an old drug, great for anxiety and sleep, but a little unpredictable in the elderly. I suggested she wean off the medication, and distinctly remember her laughing at me. She had been on this medication for decades, and it had worked wonders when initiated. Who was I, as a young physician whom she had just met, to change one of her most trusted pills.

To my surprise, a month later she was back in my clinic. Mrs. M. allowed me to decrease her nortriptyline dose ever so slightly. Every few months, she returned, noting slight improvements until finally, nearly a year later, we had discontinued the medication entirely. Her symptoms completely resolved and became independent once more.

I was inspired to enter medicine in part by seeking to cure one of the most important epidemics in rural Maine – a lack of continuity in primary care. At another medical school, I could have been pushed towards clinical research or subspecialty care. Important endeavors to many, but less relevant to the needs of rural Mainers. So instead, I attended the Maine Track, where from the first week, we were sent to clinics across the state to witness the beauty and challenges of practicing in rural Maine.

Entering training, I was keenly aware of the financial precipice on which I would stand. A quarter million dollars of debt is a heavy burden, and with these high financial pressures, students are easily drawn towards more lucrative specialties in more urban areas. Yet, Maine-focused scholarship money eased this burden and made following my dream of becoming a rural family physician all the more practical. I became a doctor who came back to town, and who stayed.

Ultimately, this isn't about me, it's about the patients. Your family, your friends, your constituents. Doctors for Maine's Future is about giving patients locally trained physicians who are in love with and prepared for rural medicine.

Please vote in support of the Doctors for Maine's Future scholarship so that more Mainers like Mrs. M can have access to a doctor they can call their own.

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