



Location, location, location—even for ob-gyns

Lydia M. Jeffries, MD, rises each morning at about 5 o'clock, often with the nose of a Great Pyrenees in her face. The dogs are ready and waiting to chase off the opossums, raccoons, and coyotes on Dr. Jeffries' North Carolina farm. After feeding her four dogs, she usually waits for the sun to begin to rise over the ridge before walking downhill to her barn. There, she feeds her "boys," two of her beloved horses, before feeding her two "girls," mares she rescued from a neglectful owner. Her dogs follow along, and as they bark, it sets off the miniature donkeys "hee-haw"ing.

Her horses neigh and nicker and paw at the ground, thanking her for their meal. When she has time and the weather is nice, Dr. Jeffries sits, sipping her coffee, watching her horses eat.

"The smell and sound of horses is a spiritual thing," she said. "Horses have a sweet, earthy smell, and there have been many sad or stressful days when I have simply buried my nose in their manes in order to find peace."

As ob-gyns prepare to finish residency and ponder the type of practice they want, some find that choosing a location based on how it will fit into their personal interests and wants is just as important as selecting a locale based on career goals. Skiers may gravitate toward the Rockies, while sun worshippers may head toward Phoenix or Miami. Some love the fast-paced, exciting urban lifestyle, while others dream of a country home surrounded by hills and valleys.

Dr. Jeffries grew up in a tiny town in Iowa, then headed to Duke University in North Carolina for her residency and hasn't left the state.



Dr. Lydia Jeffries strolls her North Carolina farm with her gelding, Spirit.

"I really wanted to come to the mountains. That was the goal," she said. She's worked in the same group practice for 23 years.

For her 41st birthday, she bought herself a horse from an ob-gyn mentor who thought she needed to enjoy life more. After living in town and boarding the animal for a few years, she bought her current farm near Asheville. "If you have the right perspective on it, this kind of peace and solitude is worth it," she said. "And the physical beauty of where I live is just breathtaking."

Peggy A. Downing, MD, grew up in Texas but had always hated the vicious heat and missed the snow she played in as a young child living in Maryland. So, when she was offered a job in Alaska after residency, she accepted. She has owned her own practice in Wasilla for about 20 years.

"The scenery is gorgeous. It's quiet and clean," she said. "The biggest thing to get used to is the dark. But in summer, you get to play in the light all the time. You might be outside gardening and suddenly wonder why you're so tired and then realize it's midnight."

Know the challenges

There are trade-offs to living in such a remote location. When she first started practicing ob-gyn in Alaska in the 1980s, Dr. Downing felt like she'd traveled back to the 1950s. "There were no specialists. The way we got our consultations was to call the University of Washington," she said. "But as an ob-gyn it was fun to do a little bit of everything."

The situation gradually improved, with a renovated labor and delivery unit and then a brand-new hospital five years ago. In her practice, she employs one other ob-gyn, several midwives, and soon, a pediatrician.

Kelley L. Valle, MD, knows what it's like to do without specialists or the latest technology. She practices gynecology part-time in a solo practice in Key West, FL. "We don't have an MFM specialist, endocrinologist, urogynecologist... You're limited on what you can do," she said.

"Rural communities offer a more relaxed and hassle-free environment in which to practice," said Brock Slabach, MPH, senior vice president of member services at the National Rural Health Association. "But physicians should know that they may need to be versatile in what they do day-to-day, and they may be a primary care giver."

Working in underserved areas, though, can sometimes help pay the bills. The National Health Services Corps offers a loan repayment program to those serving in areas with limited access to care.

Make time for you and your family

Living in a more laid-back environment and working for a smaller practice may also be more conducive to a physician's personal life. Dr. Downing tells her staff that family comes first. "If you need to go to school and see your kid's play, that's OK," she said. In the summer, her practice closes early every Friday. And the OR practically shuts down in Alaska during hunting season, she said.