

Dr. John Klassen

39 years

Department of Medicine (Internal Medicine)

1. What is your fondest memory of your time here at Foothills?

I was consulted to help treat a patient waiting for a liver transplant. She had developed an extremely high level of cholesterol (About 10 times normal) which resulted in extensive deposition of cholesterol in tendons, eyelids and skin everywhere. She could hardly walk and could not even lift up her 10 month old baby! Because of her liver failure she could not be treated with the usual cholesterol lowering drugs. Could we remove the excessive cholesterol with plasmapheresis? It was worth a trial and so we started to treat her with plasmapheresis three times a week. She had a most remarkable improvement symptomatically. The deposits disappeared. She felt very well, so much so actually that she became pregnant! I sent her for an ultrasound and when she saw the beating heart on ultrasound she wanted to keep the pregnancy. What to do? We continued with three times a week plasma exchange. She tolerated these procedures very well. She was so tough that she could continue to teach dancing lessons while waiting for her liver transplant. At 34 weeks she was successfully induced. The baby weighed 4lbs 3oz at birth and 3lbs 4oz at discharge on day 7. The baby was healthy.

Some five years later as I was walking across the parking lot at the Foothills Hospital a young boy ran towards me and gave me a great big hug! His mother was in the background. She shared that her son was well, happy and achieving success in school. Mother did finally get a liver transplant and is doing exceptionally well. She continues to teach Latin dancing. She also gives lectures etc. to groups on domestic violence. (She has had firsthand experience with this). She is writing a book on her experience. This very unique case has been presented at an international meeting.

2. Of all your contributions here at Foothills, what are you proudest of?

I have developed a world class apheresis service. We do about one thousand procedures a year for both children and adults in Southern Alberta. We treat a wide variety of autoimmune, renal, hematological, neurological, and endocrinological diseases. We also do red blood cell exchanges for patients out of province and out of country.

I introduced photopheresis for the treatment of cutaneous T-Cell lymphoma and graft versus host disease to Canada. For quite some time we received referrals from across the country for this procedure. Currently we do about 800 procedures per year. In addition to providing this clinical service we are also participating in research studies at a national and international level. Some examples are collecting patient lymphocytes which are then energized ex vivo. These cells are then injected back into the patients to treat autoimmune diseases, cancer and even to replace genetic defects such as enzyme deficiencies, for example Fabry's disease.

3. What advice would the you of today give the younger version of yourself at the start of your practicing career?

The advice would be to find an interesting niche in medicine and vigorously pursue it. But I would also recommend keeping a broad interest in general medicine as well. This is basically what I did.

4. What do you see as the biggest challenge facing physicians at this time?

The biggest challenge facing today's physicians is the explosion of information especially in immunology, oncology and biology. While I see the need for sub specialization, I also feel that there is a need for generalist who can see the big picture.

5. When you arrive at the Gates of heaven, what do you hope to hear St. Peter say?

God bless you my son.

p.s. I have a nice joke along those lines!