



**Finding ways
to make
personal
connections
in a new city**

BY MARCIA LAYTON TURNER

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People frequently have trouble re-connecting socially when they move to a new city, and for several reasons, physicians often have more trouble than others. “A move to a new city is probably more difficult for physicians than for the average person,” says Professor Arnold Spokane, PhD, of Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Spokane, a psychologist, has found that physicians as a group tend to have a certain psychological make-up. “They tend to be a bit introverted, scientifically-oriented, and not prone to a lot of social contacts,” he observes. “Health professionals are not inclined to do social things.”

Similarly, Diane Darling, the author of the *Networking Survival Guide* (McGraw Hill, 2003) and the founder and CEO of Boston-based *Effective Networking*, has found that “brilliant professionals are often very shy.” Their tendency is to hang back rather than get involved when it comes to social situations. This reluctance to reach out can interfere with, or slow, a physician’s sense of feeling part of a community.

In addition to a potential degree of discomfort with social settings, most physicians also lack free time and easy access to non-doctors, all of which makes putting down roots in a new town more challenging. But there are steps doctors can take before and after a move to ease the transition and make their new city feel like home faster.

Settling in

Socially

Do the research

After finishing her residency in general medicine at the Oregon Health Science University Hospital and a fellowship at the University of Washington in Seattle, Maria Silveira, MD, MPH, began fielding job opportunities. One in Ann Arbor, Michigan, as an attending at the Veterans Medical Center, was particularly appealing. But she knew nothing about the city except for what she had learned during two brief visits there as part of her job search. As a single woman in her early thirties, Silveira was especially concerned about the Ann Arbor social scene. With more free time on her hands but no built-in vehicle for making friends, Silveira was nervous about how she was going to make connections.

An outdoor enthusiast who enjoys biking, cross country skiing, and canoeing, Silveira decided to accept the position in Ann Arbor, convincing herself she'd enjoy the availability of outdoor activities even if the social life was lacking.

Although Silveira had only been to Ann Arbor twice, she made an effort before leaving Seattle to talk to people with ties to the city. She called friends who had family in Ann Arbor to get an introduction and tracked down people she knew who had graduated from the University of Michigan to get a sense of what to expect once she arrived. "You'll know people who know people in your new town," she says. "Make use of them."

Darling suggests e-mailing college and medical school friends and col-

leagues to ask for help. Find out if they have ties to your new city that they might be willing to share. According to Darling, letting people from your past know how you're doing and asking for their help makes them feel good. "People love to know that they've been a part of someone's life—that they've made a difference," she says. Most people will be glad to provide names and contact information when asked. The key is asking.

But you can also use research as a reason for interacting with people around you after the move, says Darling. Ask colleagues and neighbors for their advice on the tastiest entrees at a local restaurant, the best lawn service, or the most reliable babysitter. You'll gather some helpful names and

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numbers as well as make friends.

Join the local medical society Jacqueline Halladay, MD, an ob/gyn with the [Coastal Area Health Education Center](#), and her husband, Christopher Olcott, MD, an orthopaedic surgeon with [Atlantic Orthopedics](#), moved to Wilmington, North Carolina, after living in Rochester, New York for 13 years. They preferred the warmer climate of the south, but knew the social transition wouldn't be easy.

To make connections, Halladay strongly recommends that physicians “join the local medical society as soon as possible after arriving in town.” Darling takes that advice a step further, suggesting that becoming active in the

medical society will be well worth the time. “Give yourself a job to get comfortable,” such as handling meeting registration, where you are forced to come into contact with all of the attendees. Signing up for a committee is also smart because you can quickly get to know a subset of the entire group, which helps in becoming comfortable with the group as a whole.

Most state medical societies also have county-level organizations that sponsor meetings and seminars for its members. [The Monroe County Medical Society of New York](#) is one such example, which offers a number of networking opportunities—both professional and social—for its members. Its Young Physicians section is particularly attuned to issues the 30-year-old crowd

faces, although there are several special interest sections from which physicians can choose.

Executive director Nancy Adams explains that the Young Physicians section aims to give its members a chance to meet other young professionals in town. Toward that end, the group sets up joint social events with the Young Attorneys section of the local Bar Association to facilitate relaxed networking. The popular events are held at local bars and restaurants a few times a year, and the group hopes to extend the social connections by scheduling a softball tournament.

Although the membership dues are on the high side - \$350 to join the New York state organization and \$350 for local dues—Adams reports that physicians in their first year of practice are eligible for reduced fees, making membership more affordable. Medical society members also receive discounts to local cultural organizations and events as a means of encouraging support for and enjoyment of local social outlets.

Turn to your colleagues first Seema Sangwan, MD, an internist at [Peninsula Hospital](#) in Peninsula, California, has moved three times in the last two years, and none of her moves was easy. Fortunately, when her husband's employment took them to California (her last move), she was able to reconnect with the West Coast office of her first employer, [IPC —The Hospitalist Company](#). Socially, the move was also easier because her husband already had ties to the area, with a pre-existing network of friends she could join.

Professionally, a big advantage of having worked with IPC before was



Seema Sangwan, MD is an internist at Peninsula Hospital in Peninsula, California. “By working in a hospital, you quickly get to know people—both primary care physicians and colleagues—which helps a lot.” Soon after she moved to California, she began scheduling lunch dates and coffee breaks with the other hospitalists in her practice, as well as hospital staff.



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that she knew their system. Although she met the other four colleagues in her practice just one month before starting work, she didn't have to start over when it came to learning the company's policies and procedures. Sangwan found that "by working in a hospital, you quickly get to know people—both primary care physicians and colleagues—which helps a lot." Soon after she moved, she began scheduling lunch dates and coffee breaks with the other hospitalists in her practice, as well as hospital staff. This existing network of medical professionals helped make her adjustment much easier, she says.

Jacqueline Halladay, MD, an ob/gyn, and her husband, Christopher Olcott, MD, an orthopaedic surgeon, moved to Wilmington, North Carolina after 13 years in Rochester, New York. "At first, do not turn down invitations to parties and outings as they are plenty when you first move, and getting a good start goes a long way," says Halladay.

From there, Sangwan has developed her own circle of friends, who go well beyond her hospital colleagues. In addition to a fellow hospitalist and a nephrologist she frequently hangs out with, she also socializes with a writer, an engineering student, a law student, and a friend currently searching for a new job.

Go door to door

Turning to colleagues for socializing and entertainment is easier, of course, when you work in a hospital setting or HMO, rather than a private office. For doctors who have joined a practice, making an effort to get to know prima-

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ry care physicians in the area can mean more business and more acquaintances.

“Medical people like the face-to-face introduction,” reports Halladay, who comments that many specialists initially make the rounds of primary care offices personally to meet the doctors in hopes of encouraging future referrals. In addition to making some solid professional contacts, visiting other offices can result in great personal contacts.

But don't limit yourself to professional visits. Knock on your neighbors' doors to introduce yourself and find out who lives near you, recommends Darling. Or invite your neighbors to come to you by hosting an open house or potluck supper.

Rely on your family

Unlike Silveira, who moved to begin her professional career in Ann Arbor, Joel Jahraus, MD, was well settled in his career and community. The medical director for the [eating disorders program](#) at Methodist Hospital at the University of Minnesota, Jahraus had lived in the Minneapolis area for 10 years. His wife is a Minnesotan, his two daughters are in college there, and his two sons were involved heavily in sports at the secondary school level. He was well-established professionally and socially and was very happy where he was.

But a trip to investigate first-hand the very positive results his patients had been having at the [Remuda Ranch](#) treatment facility for eating disorders in Phoenix, Arizona created an unexpected opportunity for him to join the staff there. Despite turning down a job offer twice, when his wife was invited to accompany him on a third interview in Phoenix, she told him after the meeting, “You need to do this. I can learn to be happy here.”

That was what he needed to hear—“I can be happy here.”

So in July, 2002 Jahraus relocated his wife and sons to sunny Arizona, leaving his two daughters behind to finish college in Minnesota. And although his initial social contacts consisted solely of his colleagues at work, they quickly became the core of his new life in Phoenix.

Remuda Ranch's medical director worked hard to make Jahraus and his family feel at home: The director's wife immediately invited Jahraus' wife to join in social activities, and his two school-age sons' involvement in sports—football, basketball, and baseball—has introduced the family to a new community of parents, coaches, and athletes.

Before moving, the Jahrauses researched sports teams that would be appropriate for the boys, calling the Junior Suns—the youth program of the Phoenix Suns professional basketball team—for recommendations. Now “the boys are on traveling teams that have games all over the city,” explains Jahraus. This creates new opportunities for meeting people at practices and games or while participating in the teams' carpools.

What has been most important to the Jahrauses, however, has been their church, he says. It was important to the spiritual family that they find a place to worship, so they made the search for a church a priority. It took just three weeks to find a parish they wanted to join.

Although it took time for his wife to warm to Phoenix's deserts after leaving lush Minnesota, in less than a year she told Jahraus, “This is really starting to feel like home.”

For others, however, it may take longer. “There is no standard timeframe for feeling settled,” says Darling.

Find yourself—and others like you

After spending so many years in training, Silveira found she had lost touch with the interests she used to have. With no spare time, there were few opportunities to enjoy a hobby. But after starting a job with regular hours, she found she could get back into old pastimes. Silveira advises, “take time to reconnect with the person you used to be, but didn't have time for.”

By remembering how you used to spend your free time, you can investigate opportunities in your new locale to enjoy them again. Silveira turned to the Ann Arbor paper for information on local happenings and events. Many cities have similar publications that detail the local social scene and provide an entree to concerts, demonstrations, readings, courses, and events like wine tastings or home remodeling shows.

Finding people like you can be an important step in building new social ties, says Spokane. However, don't assume that other MDs will necessarily fit the bill. Medical specialties attract very different types of people, he points out, so having a medical degree may not provide much common ground.

For example, surgeons, as a group, may be very similar personality-wise with interests common to the specialty, while pediatricians may also have their own set of unique traits and interests, which may be very different from the surgeons. Given the differences across specialties, it may be easier, in some cases, to look for people outside medicine who are similar to you.

Spokane advises starting the process of meeting like-minded individuals by identifying types of people you want to be with, and then seeking them out. That may mean volunteering at a particular non-profit organization you

support, buying tickets to an upcoming play or concert, or joining a health club.

For Silveira, a book club a woman at work invited her to join has become her “anchor,” her most important social activity. “We talk about a lot more than the book,” she explains laughing. The book club participants include both co-workers and others, thereby extending her social circle.

While most doctors recognize the importance of a support system of family and friends for good health, they don’t always take their own advice. But “social connectedness is as important for a physician as for their patients,” says Spokane.

Say ‘yes’ often

Besides assuming that doctors have a lot in common simply because of their medical training, another potential blunder is declining social invitations simply because you’re uncomfortable. The opportunities for meeting new people are greatest soon after your move and if you turn down offers early, you may not get many later.

Halladay suggests “at first, do not turn down invitations to parties and outings as they are plenty when you first move and getting a good start goes a long way.” Halladay and Olcott knew no one in their new town and had to start from scratch when it came to both professional and social networking. Fortunately, they were invited to numerous parties through professional contacts, such as their investment adviser. “We ended up getting invited to multiple parties with great networking potential. At those parties we would get invited to others,” she says. From there, they began forming friendships that made them feel a part of their new

Tips for Finding New Friends

- ✓ E-mail college and medical school friends to ask for help in meeting people in your new home town.
- ✓ Order a subscription to the local newspaper before you move, to become familiar with the issues and faces of your new town.
- ✓ Join the local medical society.
- ✓ Schedule lunch or coffee dates with colleagues to get to know them.
- ✓ Make it a point to remember the names of your co-workers, who often become your first new set of friends.
- ✓ Schedule appointments to introduce yourself to primary care physicians if you are a specialist.
- ✓ Contact local professional and civic organizations and ask them to send a calendar of upcoming events that you can use to select meetings or get-togethers.
- ✓ Volunteer for a worthy organization where you are likely to meet people like you, whether that’s singles, environmentally conscious, or politically inclined.
- ✓ Join a health club, golf club, or country club, depending on the town and which activity is of greatest interest to you.
- ✓ Join a neighborhood swim club if you have children who might enjoy it.
- ✓ Ask about neighborhood playgroups that you might be able to have your children participate in.
- ✓ Women might consider joining a women’s organization or social club.
- ✓ Look into local investment clubs, where you’ll likely find people with similar aspirations but with different careers.
- ✓ Accept most social invitations extended during your first few months.
- ✓ Invite neighbors and co-workers to dinner at your home. No need to have it catered or to try and cook everything yourself—make it a potluck.
- ✓ Turn to your local newspaper or entertainment guide for ideas on activities and events to attend.
- ✓ Network with professional representatives you hire, such as your broker, attorney, or insurance agent.
- ✓ Let your spouse or partner know how you’d like to be introduced to new people, so that he or she knows how much and what kind of information to provide about you.
- ✓ Contact your alma mater and find out about any local alumni groups active in your area that you can participate in.
- ✓ Ask a neighbor if there are any social gatherings, such as a holiday party, that your neighborhood holds.
- ✓ Volunteer to put together a neighborhood directory which will help you get to know people who live near you, as well as creating a useful networking tool. ■

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community.

As time goes on, however, feeling like an outsider gets old. You may begin to wonder if you’ll ever feel at home. Unfortunately, there is no magic period of time after which you’ll become part of the scenery. Don’t put pressure on

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yourself to fit in by a specific date, or expect that you'll feel settled after a certain length of time. You will get there eventually, says Darling, it may just take more time than you initially anticipated.

"Be prepared for a year of misery," says Silveira, not because that's what you'll have, but because it may help reduce the pressure you place on yourself to fit in. "You're not a loser" if you go several months of feeling like a foreigner, she explains. Many physicians face the same situation and often have the same feelings. Eventually the feelings dissipate.

Although Darling admits that some cities are harder to break into than others, in many cases "you get what you expect," in terms of fitting in. That is, if you expect that it will take several months until you feel at home, it will probably take several months. On the other hand, if you think within a few weeks you'll feel settled, it may only take you a few weeks.

Demonstrating a positive attitude and an interest in meeting others will go a long way toward helping you feel like a native. ■

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