

Giving the Breath of Life

By Darwin Chan

I'm a respiratory therapist at Burnaby Hospital and I've found my life's work caring for patients from their first breath to their last. Some days, I resuscitate newborn babies. On others, I turn off the machine when doctor and family agree all hope is gone. I've even performed tests and compressed oxygen into an organ donor's lungs to ready them for transplant to a recipient who will receive the gift of life.

For a long time in CPR, we used the acronym A-B-C to stand for Airway, Breathing and Circulation. I like to say respiratory therapists are involved in the ABCs of life. And that's precious.

I've been a respiratory therapist for 11 years. I've worked across the Lower Mainland in hospital acute care, in diagnostics at pulmonary function labs, and in home care as an educator in the community. I've worked for Fraser Health since 2005 at Eagle Ridge, Royal Columbian and Peace Arch hospitals, among other sites. Now I work as the professional practice leader of respiratory services at Burnaby Hospital. Because of my experience, I understand a patient's journey from home to diagnostic services to hospital so I know how help them cope at home to avoid readmission to hospital.

In a typical day, an acute care respiratory therapist does rounds with patients and reviews their care, medications and conditions. We perform procedures such as intubation, where we insert a plastic tube into the airway to keep it open, and we assist with tracheotomies in which a doctor cuts an airway into the windpipe. We attend Code Blue emergencies where urgent life-saving resuscitation is needed and we lend breathing support to surgical and severely injured patients.

Respiratory therapists can also be involved in patient education, teaching about quitting smoking, using medications, and helping people manage lung diseases. We treat a lot of patients with chronic conditions like asthma and Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). A lot of what we do involves working closely with doctors and nurses. There is no hero in health care. It's not like TV where one doctor saves the day. In real life, it's about teams. You're always trying to support each other.

In this job, you really need to work well with others. Good time management skills are important so you can prioritize patients and juggle emergencies. With an aging population and seasonal respiratory illnesses, it can get very busy. It's never boring.



Darwin Chan:
"Respiratory therapists are in high demand. It's a good field because you really get to see we make a difference."

When I graduated with a Bachelor of Science degree from UBC, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. A friend told me about respiratory therapy and I liked that I could be involved in the whole spectrum of health care. So I took a two-year fast-track diploma program at Thompson Rivers University. I found a job as soon as I graduated in 2005: respiratory therapists are in high demand.

It's a good field because you really get to see we make a difference. Many times when we first see a patient they're very sick on a breathing tube. The next thing you know you're visiting them at home and they're up and walking and you think wow, we really do help people get back to their normal life.

Darwin Chan is Professional Practice Leader of Respiratory Services at Burnaby Hospital. He told his story to Elaine O'Connor.

▶ How to become a Respiratory Therapist in BC

- ☑ Obtain a diploma from Thompson Rivers University with clinical internship (the only RT program in BC; fast-track and dual programs offered)
- ☑ Pass the Canadian Board of Respiratory Care exam
- ☑ Register with the Canadian Society of Respiratory Therapists and British Columbia Society of Respiratory Therapists
- ☑ Earn current cardiopulmonary and neonatal resuscitation certifications

Learn more about qualifications from the British Columbia Society of Respiratory Therapists at bcsrc.com.

▶ More resources:

- Darwin Chan: What makes a good RT: youtu.be/rgsHWFuNUE
- Darwin Chan: The rewards of giving life and breath youtu.be/kY5a9xmQTmw

Fraser Health is currently hiring respiratory therapists. To learn more about joining our team visit careers.fraserhealth.ca, call (604) 953-5113 or email recruitment@fraserhealth.ca.