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*Elgen on his way to Ripworth High School 1928
Rourke.*

Doc honoured for rural support

By Mary-Jane Egan
Free Press Health Reporter

James Rourke, a Goderich doctor and London medical professor who is one of Canada's leading champions of rural medicine, will be honoured today in Ottawa with the Donald I. Rice Award.

The award, named for a former executive director of the College of Family Physicians of Canada, is awarded every other year to one of Canada's 25,000 family physicians.

Rourke will receive the award at the college's annual meeting.

"The thought had never crossed my mind," the 48-year-old native of Park Head (population 50, near Sauble Beach) said from Ottawa.

Rourke is founding director of the Southwestern Ontario Rural

Medicine unit (SWORM) at the UWO medical school and, since being elevated last year to full professor, is believed to be the only practising rural doctor in Canada with a full professorship.



ROURKE

He and his wife, Leslie, have a family practice of 2,500 patients in Goderich.

In family medicine practice since 1979, Rourke has led the charge to lure medical students into rural medicine and put Western on the map in 1998 when he introduced "rural week" — a requirement all first-year

med students spend at least one week's training in a rural setting.

The requirement has been copied by med schools around the country.

It was also Rourke who last year blew the whistle on the shortage of family doctors in Southwestern

Ontario, concluding at least 330 doctors were needed just to offer coverage similar to the Ontario average.

Rourke is pushing the province to adopt another Western initiative to require all third-year med students to spend at least a month outside London, practising in one of the communities in the region.

He's also urging the government to expand Western's medical slots by 24 to develop a regional medical program that would place those students in the Windsor, Essex, Lambton and Kent areas — identified as having the worst doctor shortages.

Rourke typifies "small-town country doctor makes good," said Barb Lubell, spokesperson for SWORM, noting the doctor attended a one-room school house where he had the same teacher for Grade 1 through 7.