

Dr. Reid Friesen - On Going Through an Oral Medicine Specialty Program

Intro: Hello and welcome. You're listening to a new episode of the CDA Oasis podcast. Thank you for downloading this edition of our audio programs. We do hope you enjoy it. Please tell us what you think and remember to tell other people about us on social media.

Dr. O'Keefe: Today I'm delighted to welcome Dr. Reid Friesen who specializes in oral medicine. He's based in Edmonton, Alberta, and he's going to talk to us about what it's like to be a specialist and give us advice about choosing a program in his specialty area.

Dr. Friesen: Thanks John.

Dr. O'Keefe: It's great to have you here. Thanks for calling. Give us your highlights of your professional career to date, please.

Dr. Friesen: Alright. So, I completed my dental school at the University of Alberta. I finished in 2014. After that I worked for years as a general dentist, also in Alberta. So, I got to experience the full scope of general dentistry. And after that I went back, and I embarked on the oral medicine program at the university of Alberta from 2015 and I finished up a little over a year ago in 2018. And then soon after school I signed on and I'm a professor at the University of Alberta.

Dr. O'Keefe: So, you're teaching as well as private practice, and do you work in a hospital environment?

Dr. Friesen: My environment, at the dental school here we work within an Alberta Health Services building, but it's not technically a hospital clinic so to speak, although we do engage with different medical specialists as part of our program. And then my private practice is located out in the community. So, I have a little bit of involvement with patients seen in the hospital, but mostly it's private clinical patients.

Dr. O'Keefe: Now, what attracted you to do the specialty program in the first place?

Dr. Friesen: In dental school I developed a keen interest in the medical courses that we took heavily during our first two years, in particular, the medical side of dentistry. So, naturally oral medicine was a specialty that allowed me to focus on the areas of dentistry that I liked the most. And it just so happened that after I'd finished dental school, the U of A, the University of Alberta started an oral medicine program, so I was fortunate enough to be part of the first cohort to go through that program. So, what particularly interested me in oral medicine is that we have the ability to manage patients with a wide variety of soft tissue disease,

different pain complaints, different things maybe most general dentists don't get exposure to. So, you know, being able to share my knowledge with the students and the patients is what I like to do.

Dr. O'Keefe: Right. Now, in your specialty in Canada, there's both pathology and oral medicine. Did you really just want to focus on or the medicine or did you get exposed to pathology in your program?

Dr. Friesen: Yeah. So, as you said, it's kind of a split dual specialty. A lot of people do both oral medicine and oral pathology. Some will do just one or the other. As there's a lot of overlap maybe the main difference is oral medicine is a bit more clinically catered. Obviously, oral pathology is, you know, has the microscopic components. Another thing that interests me in oral medicine, particularly at the University of Alberta, is we had a strong background in management of patients with oral facial pain and TMD. So, but to answer your question, I did have a lot of exposure to histopathology during my program.

Dr. Friesen: We would look at all of our biopsies underneath the microscope and there was a handful of certified oral pathologists on staff here that would teach us that as well. So, I was exposed to both.

Dr. O'Keefe: Right. Now, is there such a thing as a typical work week for you?

Dr. Friesen: Yeah, the typical work week, I'd say is quite variable. So, like I said, I'm fortunate to work full time at the University of Alberta. So, my day to day commitments include a significant teaching components, both didactic and the classroom, so to dental students, dental hygiene students and dental residents. Then also clinical teaching. I also do a little bit of research as well. Now, I also have my private practice with a focus on the management of TMD, orofacial pain, as well as soft tissue pathology. So, doing things like biopsies and managing chronic soft tissue disease.

Dr. O'Keefe: And is that one day a week or do you get to do some more than a day?

Dr. Friesen: Yeah, my current position is one day a week is my own private practice and then four days a week on at the school. But while I'm at the school, I have sessions where I'm in clinic as well. So, I see patients more than one day a week, but sometimes it's in concert with the residents.

Dr. O'Keefe: Variable work week. What do you like best about being a specialist?

Dr. Friesen: My favorite thing about being an oral medicine specialist is I find it extremely intellectually challenging. There's a continuous need to stay on top of the relevant literature. So, you know, I see day in day out what effect an accurate and timely diagnosis can make. Additionally, a lot of the patients we see are

relatively underserved. So, I'm happy to provide my expertise with patients that might otherwise find it difficult to receive this care. And then my favorite parts of being an academic dental specialist is the wide variety of roles in the position. So, whether I'm a teacher, doing some research or a clinician, it's never, never a dull moment. So, I like the variety.

- Dr. O'Keefe: Well, let's say somebody listening to this is sold on the idea of following your career path. What are some key pearls of information that you'd pass on to a young colleague who's thinking of going along the same line?
- Dr. Friesen: Well, my first recommendation is take advantage when you're in school. Try and get as much exposure to the different specialties you have during the time that you are at school. Obviously, you're never going to have a better, more convenient period of time in your life to be exposed to all these specialists. So, if there's a particular specialty you're interested in, reach out to that specialist at your school. I mean, even if you don't have an official residency program at your school, you'll probably have basically all of the specialists at least teaching. So, number one, take advantage during school of communicating your questions, kind of your colleagues and your professors. For recently graduated dentists, I'd say don't hesitate to reach out to the local specialists. Maybe sometimes you could shadow them. That's not always feasible, but in the very least, most specialists are going to be happy to help, you know, young engaged dentists or if you reach out enough, you'll find someone who is. And finally, conferences and meetings are great places to learn about different specialties too and talk to people from different countries doing different specialties. So, you just have to reach out.
- Dr. O'Keefe: The human touch. And the network. The network of mentors is very, very, important.
- Dr. Friesen: Absolutely.
- Dr. O'Keefe: Now, you had a particular interest in oral medicine, and you were from Alberta, it worked nicely for you there was a new program. Did you apply to many other places and did you go visit other places?
- Dr. Friesen: Yeah, I reached out, I also visited the University of British Columbia. I didn't get my application in for Toronto on time, so I only reached out to U of A and UBC. Those are the three kind of programs in Canada for this. I didn't reach out anywhere in the States. At that point in time in my career I didn't really want to go that route. So, I had the opportunity to talk to faculty and residents at UBC, in British Columbia, as well I had some exposure to that as well.

Dr. O'Keefe: Right. And have you any particular thoughts about going directly from dental school into a specialty program or a hop skip and a jump through like a GPR or something like that, or spending it a few years in practice?

Dr. Friesen: Well, John, it's a good question. I somewhat have mixed thoughts on that. I mean if you have any, like you're wavering at all in your decision and you're not 100% confident, I think it never hurts to work a year or as you said, do a GPR. I didn't personally complete a GPR, but I've heard nothing but good things from classmates and colleagues that have completed the GPR. So, if you're not sure, I think have the idea to at least try a year in a GPR or in general dental practice before you make your final kind of decision. I think that's wise. Not to mention that a lot of dental programs and specialty programs kind of like applicants with a bit of experience under their belt.

Dr. O'Keefe: Final word of wisdom to pass on?

Dr. Friesen: No, I think, I think that's about it, John. I think I want to say thanks for letting me come on here and chat with you.

Dr. O'Keefe: Thank you for taking time to share your insights. I know that they'll be very well appreciated.

Dr. Friesen: No problem.