CARING FOR A NATION

Canada's health care system is a national, publicly funded and administered one that ensures that every Canadian — regardless of ability to pay — receives needed medical care. Under the system, the costs of all necessary physician services; of hospital services including in-patient care, drugs, diagnostic tests and many out-patient services; and of some dental procedures are paid for through a combination of general tax revenues and insurance premiums collected from those financially able to contribute.

Equal Care for All

A model of equitable and progressive health care coverage, the Canadian health insurance program, like the country itself, has come a long way in a short time. Under the 1867 terms of Confederation, the provinces (and later the two northern territories) were granted primary responsibility for health care, and they soon became involved in financing hospitals and providing medical care for those in need. By 1914 the prairie province of Saskatchewan had introduced community-level taxes to hire doctors, build hospitals and finance hospital care.

As medicine advanced at an exhilarating pace over the succeeding decades, the cost of health care rose significantly. The Saskatchewan government consequently introduced in 1946 a province-wide hospital insurance program that assured every qualified Saskatchewan citizen access to necessary hospital care at public expense. Later, a similar insurance plan for essential physician services was launched.

Both were Canadian firsts and the precursors of today's national program. The federal government subsequently entered into agreements with all the provinces and territories to share the costs of hospital and medical care on the condition that the insured services met broad national standards. Today these standards require, for example, that 100 per cent of eligible residents have reasonable access to necessary hospital and physician services on a fully prepaid basis.

As a result, all Canadians are today guaranteed a standard basic level of health care. And responding to the unique health needs of their residents, all the provinces and territories have also opted to provide some additional health insurance coverage. Most help meet the costs of children's dental care, prescription drugs for senior citizens and optometry examinations. Some pay for chiropractic services, while others cover the cost of transportation to medical centres from isolated regions.

The System's Cells

Just like cells in the human body, the parts of the health care system provide specialized functions as individual elements, while in concert with each other they form a complex integrated network that maintains health.
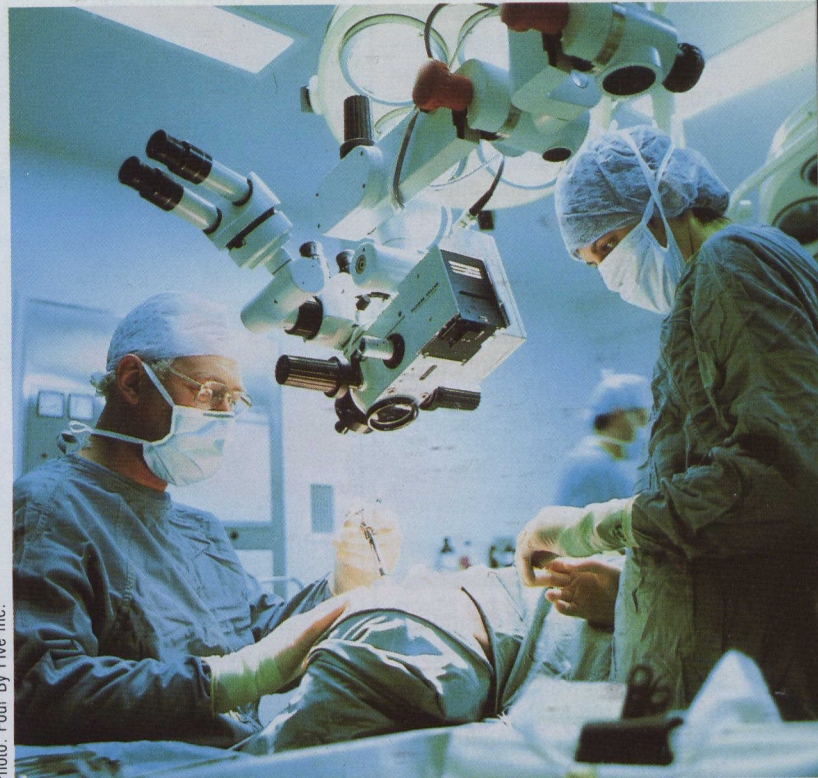
Medical experts work with state-of-the-art technology and advanced surgical techniques to provide the best care available.

The most visible components of Canada's health care network are the physicians who with other highly trained medical professionals — nurses, psychiatrists, optometrists, dentists and nutritionists to name a few — are essential for providing comprehensive health care. Doctors are for many Canadians the primary source of medical attention, with most people receiving the health services they require at their doctor's office, community health clinics or even in their own homes. Regular checkups by one's physician are an accepted part of life in Canada.

In times of serious illness or injury, medical care is available at the country's world-class hospitals. Here medical experts work with state-of-the-art technology and advanced surgical and treatment techniques to provide some of the best care available anywhere.

Public health units perhaps play the largest role in maintaining Canadians' health while most often going unnoticed. Health officials enforce strict environmental and occupational health standards in areas such as water quality, waste disposal, and exposure to toxins. Other public health services range from food inspection and immunizations to health education programs. The services' near invisibility is proof of their effectiveness — clean