

## A Long Life Is Not Necessarily a Healthy One

Canada's former health minister, Marc Lalonde, has pointed out that it is no longer possible for countries with well developed medical care systems to extend life spans simply by spending more on hospitals and patients. Between 1931 and 1961, when tuberculosis, polio, diphtheria, scarlet fever and typhoid were brought under control, the average Canadian's life expectancy increased by nearly eight years. Since 1961, however, it has increased only for children under one year and for women over 65. In 1974, some 59,000 Canadians died from heart disease; 34,000 from cancer; 16,000 from strokes; 13,000 from accidents; and 11,000 from respiratory disease.

A team led by Z. I. Sabry, MD, director of Nutrition Canada, spent the first four years of this decade examining the diet and health of 19,000 Canadians. It concluded that Canadians are ill-nourished, though not under-nourished, a condition they share with citizens of the United States and other highly industrialized countries. Their survey found that:

- \* More than half of all Canadians are overweight.

- \* One out of six has high cholesterol.
- \* One out of 16 has an enlarged thyroid. (Most of these live in the Prairie Provinces.)
- \* As many as three out of four Indian children have iron deficiencies.
- \* Iron deficiencies, which might be expected among women of child-bearing age, are found among all age groups in both sexes.
- \* Vitamin C deficiency is prevalent among the Inuit (Eskimos).
- \* Moderate thiamin deficiency is common among adults, and many also have a deficiency of vitamin C.
- \* One of every 10 pregnant women has a vitamin A deficiency.
- \* The majority of Canadians, who do not drink enough milk, have some vitamin D and calcium deficiencies.

The survey also found many fat people who ate no more than thin people. Some ate as little as 1,600 calories a day but exercised so little that they gained as much as 52 pounds in a year.

## A Problem of Ethics

Lise Fortier, MD, past president of the Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada, has been a leading advocate of birth control in Quebec. She is also an associate professor of gynecology at the University of Montreal and senior assistant in the department of obstetrics and gynecology at Montreal's Notre Dame Hospital. In an interview with Ben Rose in the 27 December 1976 issue of *Maclean's Magazine*, she discussed, among other things, some pitfalls of modern medical technology.

"People survive who before would live only a few days or a few months. They grow up and they become able to reproduce themselves and they can give those defects to their own children. An example of this is pyloric stenosis. In a child with this defect, the muscle that closes the opening of the stomach is hypertrophic [excessively large] so that the stomach is completely closed. When the child drinks, the stomach doesn't empty. The child starts vomiting and dies very soon. We found that it is very easy to treat—you just cut the muscle, that's all. . . . But what we didn't know until recently is that it is an in-

herited trait so that this will be increasing by 12% every generation. You can foresee a time when almost every baby will be born with pyloric stenosis. Naturally, in a country like ours, we can say, 'That's nothing, we can look after this, it's such a small operation,' but I don't think this could apply to the whole world. . . . The worst scandal in my opinion is how we treat neurological defects like spina bifida. These children are born paralyzed and they are incontinent, but if you operated on them and you put a kind of a valve in their brain instead of dying they keep on living. Some of them are almost completely cured. But most of them will end up being able of mind, but completely paralyzed in their lower limbs, and incontinent. . . . Why are we doing this? Why not let these children die instead of saving them for this kind of life? . . . I agree that people deserve a chance to live, but living for living is not everything. You must consider the quality of life that we will give them. Children have the right to live in a normal way, in a happy way and a healthy way, not as handicapped as this."