

water, safe food and the absence of epidemics are taken for granted by most Canadians.

Volunteers are also essential catalysts in Canada's health care system. Hundreds of voluntary organizations extend the health network by providing support and in-home health services to the elderly, the disabled and those stricken with disease; by raising funds for research and equipment; and by developing counselling and public education programs. Canada is also one of only a handful of countries that rely exclusively on voluntary donors to maintain a national blood supply. Managing the program, the Canadian Red Cross Society handles over one million units of blood annually.

Return to the Community

To ensure Canadians continue enjoying one of the highest standards of health care in the world, the system is evolving to meet changing realities. Technological advances, new health problems, rising costs, an aging population, and a new health care approach that focuses on promoting a state of health as well as treating illness are all challenging the traditional system.

In response, Canada is placing increased emphasis on innovative community health centres that encourage public participation and serve both the health and social service needs of their local community, be that a small town or an ethnic community in a metropolitan city. Community-based boards of trustees run the non-profit centres whose services are particularly responsive to local needs and the social, cultural and economic backgrounds of clients. Progressive proponents of a broader approach to health care, most also emphasize health promotion and disease prevention equally with the

provision of primary medical care. Drawing together various health care professionals under a single roof, these "one-stop shopping centres" offer co-ordinated multidisciplinary services ranging from prenatal courses and cardiac rehabilitation programs to drug addiction clinics and cancer counselling sessions. Currently under study by several other nations, Canada's community centres have proven to be cost-effective, responsive and accessible models of health care delivery.

Canada's first community health centre was established in 1963 by a local steelworkers' union in the southern Ontario industrial town of Sault Ste. Marie. Originally providing basic medical care to union members, the centre now cares for approximately 70 000 patients, nearly 70 per cent of the local community.

But although Ontario was the site of the first health centre, Quebec soon emerged as the undisputed leader in community health services. During the 1970s it introduced a reform program establishing *centres locaux des services communautaires* to meet all the health and social needs of a designated population. By last year there were 153 such centres across the province, and their numbers continue to grow.

The Pulse of the Future

The remarkable advances in medical science during the last century have altered the very pattern of illness in Canada. Following a progressive shift from short-term illnesses to more long-term degenerative conditions, chronic diseases and disabilities have today replaced communicable diseases as the predominant causes of health problems.

This general trend is both a cause and a result of the so-called "greying" of Canada.

Today there are three times as many seniors (those 65 years of age or older) as there were 45 years ago, and the number will triple again in the next four decades.

An equally important group is the disabled, as at least one in ten Canadians lives with some kind of disability — physical impairment, chronic illness, mental retardation or sensory problems.

Providing care for the elderly and disabled is thus a major challenge facing the health system. Most of these individuals neither require the intensive level of care provided in hospitals nor wish to give up independent living for institutional life. Canada has now come to realize that quality of life and respect for independence must be primary concerns in the delivery of health care.

The solution once again lies in a return to the community and more specifically to the home itself. When provided with in-home medical equipment and a comprehensive range of home care services — such as nursing care, meal preparation and telephone alert networks — the elderly, disabled and those in periods of convalescence or rehabilitation can lead active,

independent lives as fully integrated members of the community.

Other new models provide supplementary support and a continuum of health care services where necessary. Day hospitals are special daytime treatment regimes offered by hospitals for individuals living in the community. Independent Living Centres, founded and run by the disabled, provide information, counselling, and advocacy services for the disabled across Canada. And a new project in the east-coast province of New Brunswick, the Extra-Mural Hospital, provides an in-depth comprehensive hospital care program to patients in their own homes.

Today more health services are available in Canada than ever before. Although advances in medical sciences and new delivery models have reshaped the health care system in recent decades, behind it remains the original goal of providing the best health care possible to all Canadians. In Canada, health care continues to be much more than just medicine.

Caring for the elderly is one of the major challenges facing the Canadian health system.



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