

Catholic Health Care: The Compassion of Christ Compels Us

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Growing up in Saskatchewan – known as the birthplace of universal health care – we often forget our prior history which records the Catholic church as having a visible presence in health care since 1860 when the Grey Nuns served in a mission centre at Ile-a-la-Crosse. As the west was being settled, it was primarily religious women who pioneered hospital work, being compelled by the call and compassion of Christ, to respond to the sick, suffering and dying in these often rugged and fledgling communities.

Many stories are told of the difficult circumstance these women endured traveling to unfamiliar places, facing harsh climates, limited supplies,

sometimes language barriers, and left to their own ingenuity to raise money to support themselves and their work. One such story is that of two Grey nuns who, in 1907, traveled to North Battleford to raise money

for their hospital in St. Boniface, Manitoba. On their way home they stopped in Saskatoon, seeking overnight shelter at the Catholic rectory. Their arrival was seen as an answer to prayer, as the Oblate priests were overwhelmed with those suffering from a typhoid outbreak. They were begged to stay and help, and of course, they did. This was the beginning of St. Paul's Hospital in Saskatoon.

Many Sisters answered similar calls to service. By the 1930s, 34% of the hospital beds in the province were Catholic-run, by 1943 that number grew to almost 50%. By 1952 there were 24 Catholic hospitals across the province. Concurrently, nursing homes for care of the elderly were also being established, with 12 facilities in operation by 1968. In total, 14 different orders of Sisters established and operated 35 different facilities – this truly set the foundation for health care in our province.

At this time, it was evident what impact Catholic health care had on communities. Sisters who ran these facilities were not only at the forefront of medical progress in health care but did so as they modeled their call to share the healing ministry of Christ. Furthermore, their influence reached beyond their own facilities, as evidenced by the Catholic Schools of Nursing (in Saskatoon, Regina, Prince Albert, Humboldt and Tisdale) which, by 1943, were training half of all nurses in the province.

Hospital Councils played an important role in the 1930's and 40's as the nation was evolving and health care and government was growing at all levels. In 1932, the Prairie Provinces Conference was formed to safeguard the rights of Catholic hospitals in this rapidly changing landscape. By the early 1940s, Saskatchewan was leading the way in establishing health care insurance, and there was concern as to how voluntary hospitals might be affected. It seemed necessary to create a new entity, one that would guarantee the right of representation on government commissions. On May 27, 1943, with legal advice from Mr. Emmett M. Hall, the Catholic Hospital Conference of Saskatchewan (CHCS) was incorporated with Catholic facilities from across the province as members.

Although the 50s, 60s and 70s had their share of challenges, these years were ones of growth and blessing under the leadership of the Sisters. During this time, there was great development in areas such as clinical programs, health education, long-term, community and home care. Of significant note was the leadership provided in the areas of pastoral care and ethics.

The Catholic Hospital Conference of Saskatchewan continued to be an advocate for its member facilities and worked to provide networking and resources to the Sisters in the facilities. Evolving through a few formal name changes, and expanding their membership base, the CHCS is now more readily recognized as the Catholic Health Association of Saskatchewan.

With a shifting political landscape and health care reform looming, the mid 70s saw seven Catholic hospitals either sold to the government or taken over as municipal hospitals. In response to this, the Bishops of Saskatchewan incorporated the Catholic Health Council in 1977, which could take on the ownership and governance of a Catholic health facilities. In October 2000, under a new name, The Saskatchewan Catholic Health Corporation was conferred *Public Juridic Person* status. Today, the SCHC is more commonly known as the Catholic Health Ministry of Saskatchewan.

The last few decades paint a picture where only fourteen Catholic facilities remain, and the Sisters no longer populate the hallways. Technology has advanced health care to the point where it is testing the limits of our morality and pocketbooks. And post-modernity has us questioning whether our faith is found (or seen as politically correct) in the fabric of our everyday lives. One thing is for sure... the only thing constant is change.

Yet our story resonates with that of the Sisters - when challenges ensue, we, too, are compelled by the call and compassion of Christ. We, too, still desire to 'give those who are ill, through our care, a reason to hope.'

In future articles, I will share many reasons for our hope and calling to Catholic health care today.