

## ‘A Picture is Worth a Thousand Reports’

Cathy Crowe’s panel remarks at ‘Determinants of Our Health: Toronto in a Global Village.’ October 30/2008, Hart House, Toronto

*These remarks follow the Honourable Roy Romanow’s speech ‘Toward Wellbeing: A Pan-Canadian Project.’*

Today we celebrate 125 years of Public Health in Toronto.

Toronto's first Medical Officer of Health (1910-29) Dr. Charles Hastings is famous for his public health crusades. According to Wikipedia:

- He made Toronto the first city in Canada to pasteurize milk.
- He introduced a safe water supply.
- He helped establish our great public-health nursing system (I think he did that with a lot of help from one of the first public health nurses, Eunice Dyke).
- He initiated medical and dental inspection in public schools, neighbourhood baby clinics, childhood immunizations, health inspections for homes and restaurants, and (this is very important) he **eliminated privies**.

Now, I have a secret to tell you about another famous MoH – Sheela Basrur. I suspect Dr. Hastings would have been appalled at one of her actions but I think if he learned the circumstances he would have agreed it was necessary and he probably would have ensured it was photographed.

A few years ago, as many of you know, I was involved in supporting the infrastructure for Tent City, the waterfront encampment of 140 homeless people. We had many, many problems – not the least of which was a diarrhea outbreak and ecoli found in our water supply. We were unable to dig latrines or create ‘privies’ because of the water table. One day, while I was sitting in on a City Council meeting Sheela sidled up to me and said was there anything she could do to help. I said “Sheela, I need toilets.” She paused and then promptly answered “I think we can do that.” Now, our arrangement was that we would keep this ‘quiet’. I call this Sheela’s **‘intentional act of public health subversion’**.

Her simple words lead to a **very humane and substantial public health action**. I don’t know how she paid for it, or what budget line she used but it was action.

It was probably a good thing that then Mayor Lastman never learned about this.

Now, going back to Dr. Hastings.....it seems to me he was a both a right brain thinker and a left brain thinker. Besides the usual public health work of statistics and tedious reports on births, deaths and disease rates, Dr. Hastings realized the importance of images. He initiated a photographic project to record conditions and events.

Arthur Goss, chief photographer for the City of Toronto, and one of the city's leading pictorialist photographers carried out the project – the results to this day still visible in the Toronto Archives, in many books and reports, and displays – perhaps even in City Hall today.

As Roy Romanow noted - much has changed since the early years of public health in Toronto. Listen to some of the captions assigned to Goss' pictures documenting poverty and substandard housing:

- Pictures called '**Slum Interior**' and '**Slum Courtyard**';
- Picture titled '**Need for a Remedy to Eliminate Overcrowding**';
- Or '**Children in Price's Lane**' (kids in a back lane, shacks in background, wooden crates piled high) and '**Loitering on Elizabeth Street**' (a couple of little girls alone on the street and sidewalk) both suggesting the poverty and abandonment of children;
- '**Tent for Tubercular Patient**' (Tents were provided by the Health Department for tubercular patients that refused sanitarium care.) The picture is of a substantial wood structure/shack plus tent;
- '**Front Street Flophouse**' (multiple cots in a windowless room) and '**York Street Boarding House**' (hall way shot of Macedonian immigrants peering out of tightly packed rooms) depicting both the 'indigent' and immigrant experience of poverty.

These images played a substantial role in our history, propelling slum conditions into the public eye and creating a public and political sentiment that supported the formation of Toronto Housing and other reforms.

If I had a wish today it would be that Arthur Goss would spend a day or two with me. With today's technology he would likely be shooting in digital and be able to upload his pictures within hours to his website. He'd probably be making YouTube videos and that would be great. With great sensitivity I'm sure he

would capture some grim scenes that surely would make us all cry out to support the words and call for action we have heard from Roy Romanow. Arthur Goss would see but his camera would not be silent. He would create the evidence to show:

- The crushed demeanour of the middle aged man I met on that warm, sunny Thanksgiving weekend in the 4 pm line-up in the laneway outside the Good Shepherd who quietly stated: **“We are so very, very hungry.”**
- The unsuitable surroundings of the drop-in centre in a church that now ‘welcomes’ families with young children to a dark space that once only served homeless adults. **They come for food.**
- The invasion and opportunism of religious groups at corners like Sherbourne and Queen. I call the groups ‘Hotdogs for Jesus.’ **Hunger draws people to them.**
- The smudged, yellow stack of tickets given by Toronto police to a woman that read ‘encumbering the sidewalk’, ‘panhandling’, ‘jumping the TTC turnstile’. **They total just under \$1,000.**
- 10 pm: the scene inside the referral centre Tuesday night. Bright lights, coffee and fruit cups, homeless men and women sitting in chairs, unable to lie down to sleep. The resigned expression on a homeless man’s face when he is told the hostels are full. **But he can get a ‘bed’ at the church.**
- The church basement scene – 55 men and women on mats on the floor. Goss would likely call this picture **‘Need for a Remedy to Eliminate Crowding’**
- A pile of work boots. Hundreds of work boots laid by men and women outside a politician’s office as a protest to their plant closure. **They know to fear this recession - joblessness, homelessness and to fight back!**

Our pan-Canadian values have to include the right to shelter, the right to housing even if it requires legal action and a charter challenge which I’m happy to say is being seriously considered.

What we count does matter. How we mobilize for results matters too.

Roy Romanow rightly points to our history, our values and our community action. Consider the struggles of the past, those of unemployed workers and families struggling. Many reforms and relief packages had their origin in the darkness of the 1920s and 30s – in part in response to the leadership of public health reformers like Norman Bethune and Charles Hastings.

Let me read a passage from public health nurse Eunice Dyke's biography and let it serve as a reminder of our responsibility as a City.

"The general economic depression that followed the war years came to a head in the autumn of 1920. In Toronto, with an estimated 25,000 out of work, distress and suffering were widespread. As winter approached the air of desperation that pervaded the city was exacerbated by the frustration and resentment of returned soldiers unable to find jobs. ....(it goes on to say:)...City Council held a public meeting to consider the growing problems of unemployment in Toronto, and .....voted a sum of \$50,000 for emergency relief to be administered by the Medical Officer of Health...."

Consider our fight for a national housing program. Many of you here signed the '**State of Emergency Declaration**' citing homelessness as a national disaster. Hundreds of organizations signed that declaration. The municipal governments of Toronto, Victoria, Vancouver, Ottawa-Carleton, Peel and Durham region passed resolutions to the same effect. That national effort and outcry led to over \$1 Billion in aid in the form of national programs like SCPI/HPI.

Today's public health response and today's City response needs to include action to move ***upstream from the research***.

We need to call for a recession relief strategy – not just for banks, corporations and businesses but for all our people.

We should listen to our children. I've just completed production of a movie called Home Safe Calgary, the first of four documentaries chronicling homeless families in Canadian cities. The kids in that film say it best:

"It hurts to see so many homeless people"

"I want to make a difference on poverty"

"I lived in a shelter before and I know what being poor was like and it wasn't very comfortable and I always used to cry."

"The most important thing about having a house is being able to say you have one. I think that sense of belonging is important, especially for a child."

"It's like a protection, sort of like a forcefield."

Their wellbeing, their families' wellbeing, really all of our wellbeing depends on our response.