

Newfoundland's tuberculosis ship

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Tuberculosis posed an incredible burden on the early Newfoundland health care system. With the vast majority of the population inhabiting remote areas with limited access to health care, how could the spread of this disease be curbed? In 1947, the total number of active cases of tuberculosis was estimated at about 12 000, with an additional 7000–8000 people who would benefit from treatment in an institution.¹

Tuberculosis remained rampant in Newfoundland long after its spread had been under control in mainland Canada and Europe. Perhaps this was a reflection of malnutrition or of close confines during the winter months. Certainly the lack of consistent medical care was a compounding factor.

Ingenuity provided the answer to this medical conundrum. A US fishing vessel was purchased and renamed the *MV Christmas Seal*. It was retrofitted to serve the needs of the medical community. This vessel could provide a mobile medical service that could access the isolated communities and screen a population that otherwise would be overlooked. Without this floating clinic, whole populations would be in jeopardy of contracting and falling victim to tuberculosis. With long, cold winters and incredible isolation for months on end, families were confined to spending their time in overcrowded housing. This too often resulted in everyone in the household contracting tuberculosis. Who would be left to help with convalescence if every family member was battling tuberculosis? Far too often, children became orphaned and were

forced to move into the homes of anyone willing to assist.

To pay homage to this important part of Newfoundland and Labrador's medical heritage, a historical mural was created and placed on permanent display in Dover, Nfld., an isolated community that was serviced by the floating clinic. In addition, research was done and families were identified who had stories surrounding tuberculosis and the *MV Christmas Seal*.

RESOURCES

I completed an extensive search for information at the provincial archives (The Rooms) in St. John's using "tuberculosis" and "MV Christmas Seal." This was expanded to find further information in historical databases provided by Memorial University's heritage collection. I searched visual recordings of the *MV Christmas Seal* in the CBC archives. I collected information surrounding the extent of tuberculosis in Newfoundland and the impact of the *MV Christmas Seal*. Finally, I collected local stories, as told by people who attended the unveiling event, in an effort to preserve the oral heritage surrounding this important medical event.

THE PAINTING AND STORIES

Historical images were obtained from the CBC archives and from personal collections in Dover. Roseann Collins combined these images into a mosaic showing a snapshot of life in Dover during the time of the *MV Christmas Seal*.

During the unveiling of the mural, some spoke of the arrival of the MV *Christmas Seal* as a positive occurrence. This was a memorable event in such a small community. “And there we were, taken out of school for the day, with children lined up by age, walking hand in hand down to the *Christmas Seal* boat at the government wharf to get our scratches” (E. Collins: personal communication, 2013). Screening for tuberculosis became an important mechanism to curb the spread of the disease. Having a mobile x-ray laboratory that would service these isolated communities became a vital tool to help the underserved patients. With the advent of immunization through bacille Calmette–Guérin vaccination, the *Christmas Seal* could not only identify positive cases but also help protect those who potentially could contract the disease. This vaccination became known as “scratches,” and many children received these on the floating clinic.

Of course, there were people who had a positive screening result for tuberculosis. This meant travelling to the sanatorium in St. John’s for treatment. For these people, the arrival of the MV *Christmas Seal* was seen as a heartbreaking event. “What was I to do. ... I had a family of six to care for, with three of my boys having a mental disability, and a brand new baby. ... I was forced to go to ‘The San’ for treatment. How could my husband care for everyone? We had no choice but to give up the baby” (F. Keats: personal communication, 2013). Harrowing stories such as these were far too fre-

quent in the battle against tuberculosis. Coming from a close-knit community, this baby was raised by a neighbouring couple who were unable to have children of their own. It was only years later, as an adult with a young family of her own, that this person learned her heritage.

COMMENT

The purchase of the mobile clinic served as an ingenious way to curb the spread of this communicable disease. It is perhaps the perfect marriage of traditional Newfoundland culture and state-of-the-art medical care.

The information gathered during this project has preserved a rapidly changing way of life. This cultural heritage may have otherwise been lost. The project allowed open communication around a medical condition that is still seen in our province today. Some of the stories shared during the unveiling had not previously been discussed, but now this “burden” has been shared by the whole community. A mural was chosen as the medium for this project so that the event would have a lasting legacy and serve as a visual reminder for visitors and residents alike.

REFERENCE

1. Notes on health. Box 56-1-5B. St. John’s: The Rooms Provincial Archives; 1947.

Competing interests: None declared.

Country Cardiograms

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In most issues of *CJRM* an ECG is presented and questions are asked.

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