*I*ntroduction

The year 2005 marked the 100th anniversary of the province of Alberta. Today, Alberta boasts a vibrant economy and one of the best health care systems in Canada and the world. Albertans can expect to receive high quality care and services designed to prevent disease, manage disease, and promote and protect their health. At the turn of the century, Albertans were living shorter lives often reduced by infectious diseases that knew no boundaries. Today, with advances in medical science and public health measures, significant gains have been achieved in both duration and quality of life. The roots of today's system began modestly more than 100 years ago before Alberta became a province.

Health services at the end of the 19th century were primarily delivered by charitable organizations. The first public health practitioners in Alberta were three Catholic nuns, Sisters Emery, Lamy, and Alphonse, who belonged to the Order of Charity. They were commonly known as the Grey Nuns. In 1859, the three Sisters were sent to Lac St. Anne to settle and provide a service to "suffering humanity". The Grey Nuns worked closely with First Nations, who were at the time relying on traditional healers for their health needs.

In 1865, Alberta's first doctor arrived. Dr. William McKay was hired by the Hudson's Bay Company to act as the resident physician for Fort Edmonton and tend to the health needs of the company's employees. While hired by the company, Dr. McKay was similar to other physicians of the day; he did not refuse anyone his medical services should they be needed. Dr. McKay traveled extensively throughout northern Alberta and the Northwest Territories providing needed medical assistance.

Provinical Archives of Alberta, A2994
Public Hospital – in operation between 1900 - 1911

While the Order of Charity brought the first public health practitioners to Alberta, and the Hudson's Bay Company brought the first doctor, it was the police that established Alberta's first hospital. The Northwest Mounted Police, now the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, were created to stop the whiskey trade and prevent abuse of First Nations by traders. The hospital was located in Fort McLeod and was established in 1874 where Dr. George Kittson provided care to the constables and civilians. Seven years later in 1881, the Grey Nuns established a hospital in Edmonton.

Completion of the railway to Alberta brought with it many new settlers and consequently, more disease. While still haphazard, the beginnings of Alberta's health care system were emerging. Multiple players including government, charitable organizations, religious groups, business, and a police force, provided health services of varying types.

Between 1905 and 1945, there were a number of developments that would influence the direction of health care delivery. While communicable disease and injury were still the major causes of premature mortality, public health measures were beginning to have an impact. Urbanization began to have an influence as people started moving more towards cities. This combined with two world wars caused significant social disruption and increased the need for a more organized approach to health services. Families, small communities, churches and charitable organizations found it increasingly difficult to meet the needs and demands of the less fortunate.

During the prosperity of the "roaring twenties", the federal government developed the Old Age Pension in 1927. The move was highly criticized as people believed it would discourage self-reliance.[1] The prosperity of the 1920s ended with the depression of the 1930s. A realization that misfortune could strike people through no fault of their own began to change the thinking around access to health services. It became clear that charitable organizations and private insurance schemes of the time were simply not meeting the needs of the disadvantaged. New drugs, like penicillin, began improving health outcomes, but also increased the cost of providing service. Improved care and increasing cost began to increase people's interest in health care.
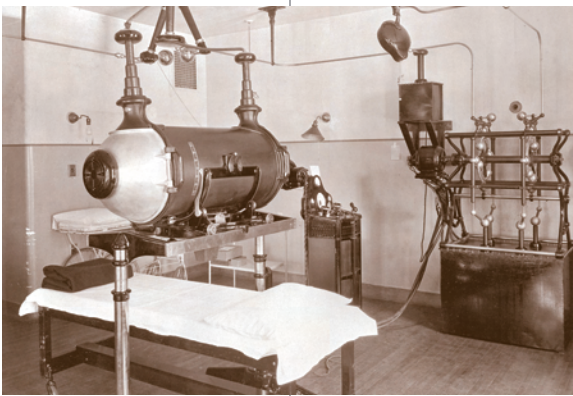
Provincial Archives of Alberta, A8320
Royal Alexandra X-Rays and High frequency apparatus – 1926

Following the Second World War, there were significant advances in diagnostic and therapeutic abilities. The public health system was able to significantly reduce the burden of communicable disease and non-communicable (chronic) conditions became more common. Health insurance programs still varied and were inconsistent in their coverage. None could guarantee services for anyone suffering significant financial setbacks. In 1947, Saskatchewan established Canada's first universal insurance program ensuring hospital care would be provided to all residents of the province regardless of means. Alberta followed Saskatchewan's lead, creating a similar provincial plan. The provincial plan required the collection of premiums to help offset the costs of offering a universal program.

Provincial Archives of Alberta, A8365
Red Cross exhibit at Edmonton Exhibition

In 1957, the federal government passed the *Hospital Insurance and Diagnostic Services Act*. The *Act* stated that provinces willing to provide hospital services to their residents in a consistent manner with uniform terms and conditions would be eligible for federal grants. Alberta was among the first five provinces to join, with all ten participating by 1962. While the *Act* made hospital services available, it did not address access to physician services.

In 1964, a Royal Commission led by Justice Emmett Hall made recommendations for a stronger federal role in the provision of health services. Justice Hall also recommended that it would be desirable to have a universal health care system for all Canadians. As a result, the federal government passed the 1966 *Medical Care Act* allowing the federal government to provide grants to provinces that provided comprehensive and universal coverage of hospital and medical services to its residents. Initially, Alberta and Quebec were opposed to the *Act,* stating that it interfered with provincial priorities and responsibilities. In 1969, Alberta passed its *Alberta Health Care Insurance Act* providing comprehensive health services to all residents of the province.

From these humble beginnings, Alberta has created a diverse health care system that provides a continuum of care to all Albertans. Even with the successes in improving health, many challenges are faced by today's health care system. Chronic diseases impart a significant burden on the health care system and society, an aging population requires changes in service delivery, health disparities remain difficult to alleviate, emerging pathogens and a global economy increase the risk of pandemics. These factors, among others, create challenges for sustaining the health care system in Alberta.

To lower rates of chronic disease, Alberta Health and Wellness has a number of initiatives in place that aim at reducing disease onset. These include programs aimed at improving lifestyle, activity and nutrition in an effort to promote the health of the population and reduce the risk of disease. Examples of such initiatives include the Alberta Diabetes Prevention Initiative, the Influenza Self-Care Initiative, the Alberta Tobacco Reduction Strategy, Healthy U campaign and others.

HISTORICAL EVENTS

1874   First hospital in Alberta is built by the North West Mounted Police in Fort McLeod.

1877   The North West Mounted Police and local miners cooperatively build a hospital in Lethbridge.

HISTORICAL EVENTS

1889   Government financial involvement begins with the provision of one hundred dollars to the St. Albert hospital and five hundred dollars to the Medicine Hat General Hospital.