

A Brief History of Medicare in Canada

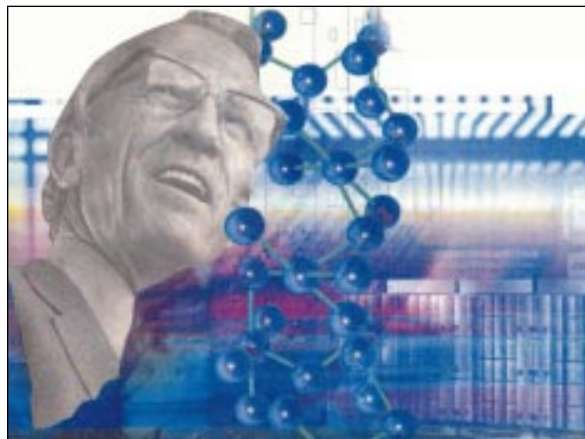
The focus for the front cover of *CJHP* in 2003 is important Canadian medical institutions and discoveries.

Health care issues and health care funding have been prominent in the minds of Canadians over the past several years, but national health insurance was essentially the last of the great social programs to be considered by the federal government of Canada. Family allowances, unemployment insurance, and old age security were all in place by the early 1950s. Around that time, several private insurers, primarily doctors' groups, were expanding their offerings and enrolling many new patients.

In 1962, the government of Saskatchewan, under premier Tommy Douglas (Kiefer Sutherland's grandfather, for you younger members), introduced universal medical coverage, which prompted a majority of the province's doctors to withdraw their services and resulted in an "opt-out" option for physicians.

In 1964, the Royal Commission of Health Services, headed by Justice Emmett Hall of Saskatchewan, recommended comprehensive, universal health service programs for all Canadians. The federal Liberal government of Lester Pearson announced in 1965 that it was prepared to pay half the cost of any provincial medicare plans that met the criteria of comprehensiveness, portability, universality, and public administration.

In December 1966, after much parliamentary debate, the *Medical Care Insurance Act* received the unanimous support of all federal parties. However, it took 3 more



Tommy Douglas, the father of medicare in Canada, held political office at both the provincial and national levels from 1935 until 1976. He was the premier of Saskatchewan for 17 years starting in 1944 and was the leader of the national NDP party from 1962 until 1969. When he died on February 24, 1986, at the age of 81, Douglas was heralded as "a man who did good deeds in a naughty world." Photograph of Tommy Douglas courtesy of *The Weyburn Review*, Weyburn, Saskatchewan (<http://www.weyburnreview.com/tommydouglas/welcome.html>).

years before most of the provinces accepted Ottawa's contribution toward their own provincial health insurance programs.

The year 2002 saw the release of two major reports on the status of the health care system in Canada (see *CJHP* 2003;56[1]:8-11). The reports of Senator Michael Kirby's senate committee (*The Health of Canadians — The Federal Role*) and Roy Romanow's Commission on the Future of Health Care in Canada (*Building on Values: The Future of Health Care in Canada*) offer similar recommendations for improving health care but differ considerably in their approaches to funding the system.

Source

Gratzer D. *Better medicine: reforming Canadian health care*. Toronto (ON): ECW Press; 2002.

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