

The Sisters of St. Joseph in the Hamilton diocese: 170 years of healthcare

On April 19, 1852, at the request of the Very Rev. E. Gordon, Vicar General of Hamilton and with the approval of Bishop de Charbonnel, the only Bishop in western Ontario at that time, three Sisters of St. Joseph came to Hamilton from Toronto. They opened their first convent on Cannon and McNab Streets. Here the Sisters ran a private elementary school and cared for orphans until 1857. In 1854, there was a cholera epidemic, followed by an outbreak of typhus. The Sisters were placed in charge of immigrants stricken with the disease and housed in railway sheds. On April 19, 1856, the congregation became independent from the Toronto congregation.

In 1861, the Sisters opened St. Joseph's Hospital in Guelph in an old farmhouse. This was the sixth hospital in Ontario and the first opened in Canada by the Sisters of St. Joseph. Later, in 1862, a larger building was built and added on to in 1877. In 1888, because of a diphtheria epidemic, an isolation cottage, known as a "pest hut" was built behind the hospital. The original buildings were later used for the House of Providence which began operating in 1861 until 1959



when residents were moved to St. Joseph's Home. In 1959, the Sisters unveiled St. Joseph's Home in Guelph, and residents were moved from the House of Providence to the new building which contained a wing for the chronically ill. The programs and services were delivered in conjunction with St. Joseph's Hospital. In 1984, the hospital and home amalgamated as St. Joseph's Hospital and Home changing its name to St. Joseph's Health Centre Guelph in 2001.

In 1890, the Sisters opened St. Joseph's Hospital in Hamilton. Throughout the early years, the Sisters held positions in all areas of the hospital and were aided by lay workers beginning at the turn of the century. The staff battled major diseases from whooping cough, diphtheria, smallpox, measles, and mumps. After a full day attending to the sick, the Sisters did the

laundry, prepared food, did housework, and kept records. The quality of care was the same for all. Quite often, it went beyond medical care. One Sister used to take it upon herself to borrow flowers from those who had plenty and make up little bouquets for patients who had none. There is an anecdote concerning a young man who was returned to his room after chest surgery. Later that night, in a state of delirium, he ripped out the drainage tubes connected to his chest, jumped out of bed, and escaped from the hospital. In a pouring rainstorm, Sister



Lioba O'Dwyer chased after him, eventually jumped in a passing taxi and caught the patient and brought him safely back to the hospital. A plan for a new St. Joseph's Hospital was approved in 1944, and the new hospital opened in 1947, and occupied most of the block from Charlton Avenue to Mountain Boulevard. which was renamed St. Joseph's

Drive in 1958. In 1962, a new St. Joseph's Hospital building officially opened, with grants from the federal and provincial governments, a \$1 million commitment from the Sisters, and a capital grant from the City of Hamilton, along with donations from the public.

In 1916, the Sisters of Providence in Kingston purchased land with the intent of opening a hospital in Kitchener, but when they were unable to fulfill this goal, the Sisters of St. Joseph bought the land from them. In 1924, the Sisters established St. Mary's Hospital which in 1959, became known as St Mary's General Hospital.

In 1955, the Sisters opened St. Joseph's Hospital in Brantford (until 2001 when it became a long-term care facility).

Before 1950, the hospitals were owned and operated by the Sisters. In the early days, people could not always pay for health care and so payment sometimes took the form of produce! In 1959, the Ontario Hospital Insurance Plan came into effect and provided insurance for Ontarians and payment for hospital treatment, which meant both that hospitals were now paid for the care they provided and more government involvement.

In the early 1940s and 1950s, advisory boards were started to help with fund raising and the construction of expanding facilities. These became, in 1968, Boards of Trustees which took responsibility for the operation of each hospital and home. Shortly before, in 1964, Mother Alacoque Hayes began to bring hospital administrators together with the General Council of the congregation to discuss common issues and encourage collaboration across the hospitals and homes run by the Sisters. In 1972, the first meeting of Board chairmen and chief executive officers and the Council was held to educate the Boards of their relationship to the Sisters of St. Joseph. In 1981, Boards of Trustees, senior management, and Sisters in all the hospitals and homes were invited to a workshop to learn about the Sisters' charism and begin a process of identifying their mission in healthcare. The Sisters in Hamilton were one of the first congregations to begin this process of mission education which is now considered vital to the ongoing life of Catholic hospitals and homes.

Mention must be made of the lay women who assisted the Sisters. At St. Joseph's Hospital in Hamilton, the hospital women's auxiliary, which was started in 1945 by the Catholic Women's League, held an annual tag day that helped reduce the building debt and helped build a new laundry. As well, the auxiliary raised funds through Valentine dances at the Royal Connaught, and membership teas at the nurses' residence. The members of the auxiliary volunteered at the information desk during hospital visiting hours, visited patients with books, helped with sewing, supplied linens, furnished rooms, and helped purchase equipment.

Over the years, Sisters served in many roles in the hospital including as chief executive officers, nursing administrators, business administrators, medical record librarians, dietitians, pharmacists, laboratory technicians, in the accounting departments, in hospital chaplaincy, in pastoral care services, as occupational therapists, in palliative care, in therapeutic counselling, in laundry services, and as X-ray technicians.

For more information, please visit www.csjarchive.org

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