

## A disarming doctor

One evening in 1984, with nothing more pressing to do, Dr. Mary-Wynne Ashford attended a lecture by Dr. Helen Caldicott on nuclear disarmament. For the next 3 nights she couldn't sleep because she kept thinking about the 50 000 nuclear weapons stored worldwide. On the third morning, she decided to do something about them.

Today, this palliative care physician from Victoria is copresident of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW). She travels endlessly, meeting with world leaders such as the prime ministers of India and Canada, and working with musician Bruce Cockburn, actor Michael Douglas and anyone else who will join the crusade for nuclear disarmament.

Ashford has come a long way from her birthplace in Indian Head, Sask. Her father was a bush pilot who mapped out most of northern Manitoba and saw "taking off into uncharted skies as exciting, not frightening."

Ashford has followed the same flight plan. Initially a high school chemistry teacher, she decided at age 38, with 3 children in school, to go into medicine and satisfy a fascination with the mind-body connection. Why palliative care? "I like the intensity of the relationship with the family and the dying person, and seeing how people grow in the face of enormous losses." She was working as an FP and associate physician at a hospice when she heard Caldicott speak. She responded by joining the IPPNW's Canadian branch, Canadian Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (CPPNW); it is now called Canadian Physicians for Global Survival.

Along with physicians such as Bernard Lown and Jonas Salk, Ashford attended IPPNW's international congress in Budapest. "I saw a tremendous commitment to social justice and idealism among these physicians," she says. "And because we're doctors we get respect and access to world leaders. We're a credible voice."

She began delivering 50 to 100 speeches annually and publishing articles in lay and academic publications. In February 1987 she spoke at the Great Peace Forum for the Survival of Mankind in Moscow, which was hosted by Mikhail Gorbachev and attended by the likes of Pierre Trudeau, Gregory Peck and Graham Green.

Ashford was inspired to become president of CPPNW in 1988. Using money from the IPPNW's Nobel Peace Prize, she then spent 3 months in France, where she spoke of the nuclear threat in 26 communities. That same year she presided over the IPPNW world congress in Montreal,

where she was emcee at a peace concert starring Crosby, Stills and Nash, Bruce Cockburn and Michel Rivard.

In 1991, Ashford went international and became IPPNW's vice-president for North America. The association stimulates dialogue, educates medical students about the medical consequences of nuclear weapons, does research on these consequences and works to abolish the small-arms trade. At one of the first-ever meetings on land mines in the UK, Ashford was impressed by the sophisticated strategizing and its immense success: media and politicians were hand-

picked, spins were put on stories. "The rapidity [of results] was astounding," says Ashford. "It's been so difficult to do this with nuclear disarmament."

She theorizes that this is because the end of the Cold War signalled the end of many people's fears about nuclear weapons. Ashford says there is no reason to feel safe: 35 000 nuclear weapons are still deployed, about 5000 of which are always ready for instant launch.

"Do you know what the greatest threat to public health is? It's the threat of nuclear war," she says, quoting from her promotional video, *We said no nukes*.

"We're busy," she acknowledges, "but we've had enormous successes." The biggest by far was the World Court Project. It was initiated by physicians and lawyers but finally involved 30 million people who signed statements asking the

World Court to decide on the legality of nuclear weapons. The 1996 decision that they were illegal was the "biggest event in the peace movement in 20 years," says Ashford.

In the midst of her antinuclear activities, Ashford became plagued by questions surrounding the roots of violence. "If we don't discover them," she says, "we may go on to invent something even more horrible than nuclear weapons." So in 1992 she began a doctorate at Simon Fraser University. It dealt with boredom as a neglected issue in violence-prevention programs for adolescents. She began teaching at the University of Victoria in 1996, but after 5 years missed medicine too much. Last June, she started practising again.

She's now serving her second 2-year term as IPPNW copresident, along with Russian and French doctors. They continue to meet with government leaders: they state their positions, and Ashford and her colleagues "walk a fine line. We're not abrasive or confrontational but we have to hit the issue on the head while leaving room for the discussion to progress." That seems to be a winning philosophy as IPPNW celebrates its 20th anniversary. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*



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Ashford: "We said No"