

Gens de Cœur

From a 2-room schoolhouse to telemedicine

It's been a long trip from the small logging town where Dr. Max House attended classes in a 2-room school to the lieutenant-governor's mansion in St. John's, but the Newfoundland physician and telemedicine pioneer has revelled in it.

"It was a difficult experience," House says of his childhood in Glovertown, Nfld., during the 1930s. "So many people had to deal with terrible circumstances. My family had a lumber business and we struggled all the time to keep it going.

"But I always felt there was something interesting in the future for me."

That optimism is striking given the situation in Newfoundland during the 1930s. When House was a child, it was rare to see a doctor in Glovertown, and rarer still to have access to the outside world through a telephone. But that didn't deter him from embarking on a career in medicine, and pioneering the use of communications technology to deliver medical education over long distances and to provide telemedicine.

House set out for Memorial University in St. John's to study pre-med and then entered Dalhousie's medical school in 1947. One of his early jobs took him to Baie Verte, on the northeast coast of Newfoundland, where he worked as a general practitioner.

"The community was very isolated — there were 4 or 5 weeks of the year that you couldn't get in or out. It was stressful at times but it was also interesting and fun. I felt that I contributed something to the community."

In the 1960s House focused on his specialty of neurology, and for half that decade was the only neurologist working in the province. He went on to head the Department of Neurology in the province's largest hospital, and also began teaching at Memorial University's fledgling medical school.

During this period, House became interested in using technology to provide continuing education for doctors and medical services for patients in isolated communities.

"Early telemedicine lacked interactivity because it usually consisted of broadcasting a class to doctors via television. They couldn't ask questions or discuss ideas or issues."

But House soon changed that when he founded the Telemedicine Centre at Memorial, where he developed new

ways to deliver CME and health services to remote communities. One sign that he quickly established himself as a pioneer and one of the world's leading experts is the stamps in his passport — he delivered keynote addresses at conferences in more than 35 countries, and directed health and education projects in Africa and the Caribbean.

The honours he has received as a result of these contributions range from the Order of Canada to the CMA's Medal of Service and the Atlantic Canada Innovator of the Year award.

In 1996, as House was starting to wind down his medical

and teaching career, he was approached about the lieutenant-governor's post. He had scaled back his clinics and time in the classroom, and was now devoting more time to some of his other passions, including art and literacy projects. "At that point, I had never done anything more political than vote," House says.

Now he's in a job that requires him to preside in a ceremonial fashion over Newfoundland and Labrador's political life. As lieutenant-governor, he summons and dissolves the House of Assembly, gives Royal Assent to legislation and ensures that the

premier's office is filled in the event of a death or resignation.

House is fascinated by the political process and takes every opportunity to educate and inform others about his new job — last year he explained his new role to political science students at Memorial.

But for House and his wife, Mary, the most enjoyable part of their role as the province's vice-regal couple is representing the people of Newfoundland and Labrador and travelling throughout the province. "The people are the focus for us — meeting them, hearing about their lives and seeing their communities," says House.

He remains fiercely proud of his home province. When he was sworn in as lieutenant-governor in 1997, he gave an impassioned speech about the strengths of the province's people and his commitment to them. "My hope is that within 5 years I will have been able, in some way, to have made a difference. In Newfoundland and Labrador, we have seen the worst of times and some better times but, in my view, the best is yet to come." — *Beth Ryan*, St. John's



Dr. Max House: For Newfoundland, "the best is yet to come."