

# Medical history of northern Cape Breton on display

from page one  
 exhibit, a listing of medicinal plants - many of which are currently growing in the Settlers' Garden at the museum, and a mystery drawer of old instruments for visitors to guess at.

Some of the display items were borrowed for the exhibit from the Nova Scotia Medical History Museum in Halifax and from the family of Dr. William Lamond who practiced in Neils Harbour in the 1930s.

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of the displays related to "hauling teeth". Before 1976, we learned, people in the community depended on the local doctor to "haul" teeth.

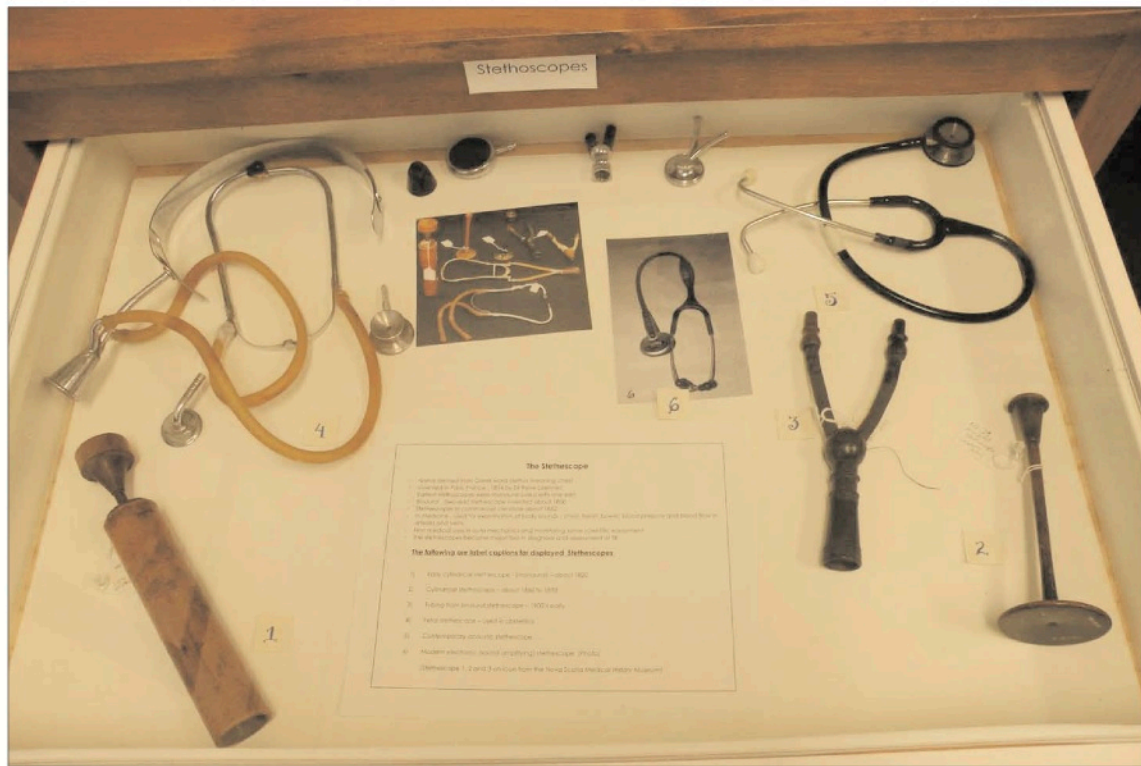
The doctors pulled hundreds of them every year, some carrying the necessary tools in their doctor's bag. It was not unheard of to do the extracting right in the kitchens.

However, Dr. C.L. MacMillan, who sometimes traveled to the north from Baddeck, found telephone booths particularly useful in pulling teeth!

There was also a neatly arranged display of various fish hooks removed from fishermen over the years, as well as a foot long drill bit which lodged in a wharf worker's hand, who recovered nicely.

One of the former staff who had started her nursing career at Cottage Hospital, Patricia Fricker, mentioned the worry of evacuating the occasional patient to Sydney during the colder weather, fearing they might go off the slippery road along the North shore. On the way back they did not care so much.

After a musical interlude provided by Shawn MacKinnon on the fiddle and Earl Gwinn on the guitar, Dr. Ken Murray, local family physician, gave a formal welcome to everyone. There was an official cake cutting by Eva Strickland



Above are some of the medical listening devices used in earlier days. The *Early Medical Care North of Smokey* exhibit will run until October at the North Highland Community Museum, Cape North.

and Miriam Organ, both former staff at Buchanan Memorial Hospital.

Ken Murray then introduced the guest speaker, Dr. Brian MacDonald, a dentist and son of Dr. Austin and Marie MacDonald.

He said that before 1942 there was a big turnover of doctors North of Smokey, most lasting only a year or less. Sometimes there was no doctor in the area. The gypsum mine was thriving with an urgent need for a permanent doctor for its many employees and families. Dr. Austin arrived that year with Marie, a nurse trained in public health. A year later the Buchanan home in Neils Harbour was turned into a cottage hospital, serving at first mostly as a place for having babies. In the beginning the hospital was open only in the winter.

A shy but determined man, Dr. Austin boxed on the weekends to help pay his way through medical school. Short of money to buy a ring to marry

Marie, and hearing blood donors were paid, he donated enough blood over the next three weeks to make the purchase!

He had tried to enlist in the military but was turned down due to colour blindness, and so ended up 'down north' instead where he spent the next 18 years.

Brian and his brothers were more or less raised in the cottage hospital, sometimes tethered to a clothesline while his parents both worked, later herded by a big dog. But he remembered how good the neighbours were to him and his sib-

lings. "We were basically community kids."

He described the challenges of making house calls with horse and sleigh or buggy. Especially when the doctor had to see someone in far away Bay St. Lawrence or Meat Cove, Ingonish or Pleasant Bay. He depended on the help of people along the way, for fresh horses and meals, and more when someone one was very ill and needed to get to a hospital. The sleigh was the first ambulance. Sometimes the kitchen table had to act as a surgical table. "It was a time of being ingenious."

With no phones in the area in those early years, messages of someone needing medical care would have to be relayed by telegraph and on foot. This could take several hours or a full day depending on the location.

Another challenge was getting individual medicine bottles since the companies did not supply these. So in the summers young Brian would go door-to-door looking for old medicine bottles which they would sterilize and reuse.

In the early 1950s there was interest in a new bigger hospital. Buchanan Memorial Hospital opened in 1953.

Dr. Brian MacDonald is now retired and living in Sydney.

The Exhibit of *Early Medical Care North of Smokey* will until the museum closes in October. Summer hours are 9:30 am to 5 pm daily.

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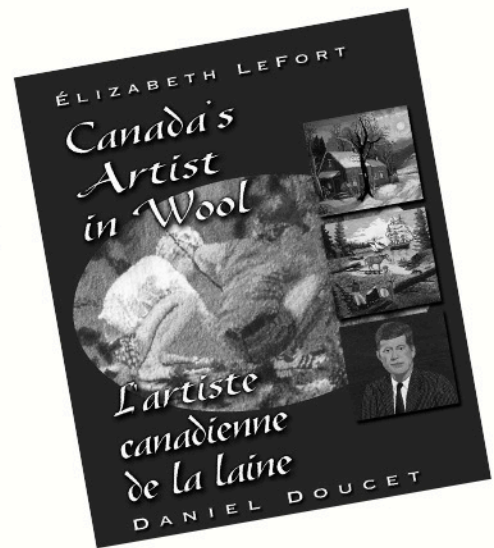


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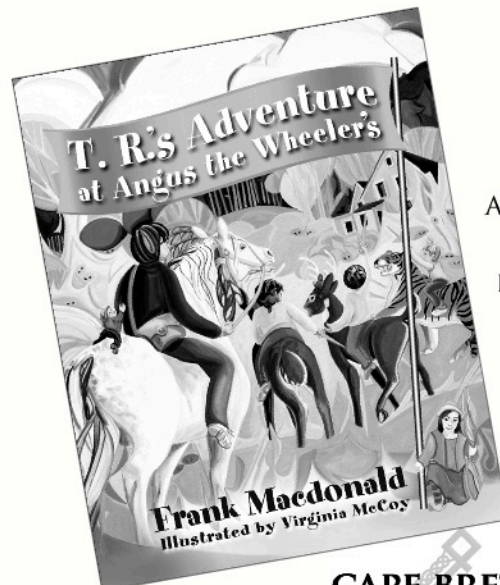
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