



## THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



*Then –  
As a student  
nurse with VON*



*Now –  
Dr. Helen K. Mussallem, O.C.  
President, VON Canada*

1991 National Annual Meeting

## **PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE**

Our world is witnessing daily, unprecedented, incomprehensible and turbulent changes. It is a world in abrupt collision with the future when we are all forced to examine and re-examine the political and social goals of our national sphere and spheres beyond. Does this have implications for VON Canada?

VON Canada is a unique organization in our modern world and has the potential for unique solutions in a rapidly changing society. It could be a role model in the health sector of many countries world wide. When carrying out health assignments in countries in all regions of the world, I frequently mused on how the VON Canada model could be applied to implement primary health care. However, the model is unknown in most countries as is the case in much of our vast country. In large segments across Canada, the superb services of VON are unknown. Most of the population have never seen a VON nurse practising in the home or in the community. Yet, where our 73 branches are located, the significant increase in the demands for service are spectacular. Not only have the well established programs expanded but new, innovative programs have been implemented and VON-born ideas accepted.

You are aware that governments of over 160 countries of the world, including Canada, have committed themselves to the goal of the World Health Organization -- "Health for All by the Year 2000, through Primary Health Care." Yet, across our bountiful country, primary health care, as enunciated in the Declaration of Alma Ata, has, in only a very few locations, become a reality. Provincial governments have -- and still -- support a health care system based on the Western Medical model which is costly and sickness oriented.

Despite recent pronouncements, made by several provincial governments, that more financial resources would be available for community-based health programs, this has not been translated into fiscal policy. Costs of sickness care are spiralling, leaving less and less for health promotion, disease prevention, and quality home and community care for those requiring it. The shift must be made from "hi tech" or "institutionalized" care to community based care. This is viewed as a major challenge to all governments at all levels that are overburdened with health care -- or sickness care -- costs. VON has the infrastructure to assist local, provincial and national governments to make this shift. VON Canada's Mission Statement provides the incentive.

Today, VON holds in its hand the key that can unlock the door to cost effective, quality health care for all. The VON model is a cost effective alternative to the Western Medical Model that our country can no longer afford. The great challenge and opportunity for VON is to make available in every community, in every province and territory, VON's wide range of quality health services to assist individuals in maintaining health and, in the event of illness, to be cared for in their homes. In such a transformation, the cost savings alone in the provincial and national health sector would be so significantly reduced that governments and others would ask why it had not happened sooner. Is it due to lack of political or bureaucratic will? As already noted, the VON organizational model provides the opportunity to implement cost effective health service with primary health care available to all.

During the two years as president of VON Canada, my admiration, respect and enthusiasm for the work of VON nurses, other health professionals, volunteers and all the VON family has increased rapidly and daily. Those practising today add great lustre to the record of the almost 100 years of community care. I salute each one of you! I know you are the magic ingredient in our health system that can make the difference in rescuing medicare. You are Canada's ambassadors of health. You exemplify our motto "Caring for Life."

As my presidency draws rapidly to a close, I must publicly thank those who have made my terms of office so rewarding, so exciting, and so labour intensive. I must, of course, thank those on the front lines -- the deliverers of our services. They include those extra special nurses and other professionals who provide expert care in a wide range of settings, as well as the volunteers, and the staff who support them. I am grateful to all provincial senior staff and executive directors who bear the heavy responsibility of ensuring that the valued VON community-based service standards are maintained and delivered.

There are so many more to be thanked. But I would especially like to thank the VON Canada board of directors, individually and collectively. Their debates were always of a high calibre and, I must confess, I have enjoyed working with this board more than any other in my entire professional career. I save the last armful of thanks for the national office staff -- all senior staff located at headquarters, those located in provincial branches, the support staff and, in particular, the national executive director, Donna Roe, and her executive assistant. Donna has provided the vision and leadership required to launch new creative programs while administering, superbly, a large nationwide community-based health service. This is a formidable task, especially when it is carried out with limited resources. I can never thank her adequately for the assistance she provided the office of president and for making my tenure in office a valuable, rewarding and pleasant experience.

Like the president before me, I share their "terminal feelings." My VON "feelings" were generated decades ago when, as a nursing student in Vancouver, I was selected for community service with VON. That month of student experience with VON, where services were provided with equal concern for persons in the slums of Vancouver to the wealthy section of that city, changed my whole perspective on being a nurse. I did not add to the lustre of VON then and, had anyone prophesied that I would be president of VON Canada from 1989-91 and living in Ottawa, I would have concluded immediately that they needed mental health counselling.

In retrospect, that was a kinder and gentler society. But we cannot go back to what used to be. We are all programmed to go forward. If we are to do so and not reach ultimate destruction, we must do so with trust, with love, with faith and with an earnest solicitude for the truth that I can liken only to prayer.

I thank each of you with whom I met in your local settings in various parts of Canada from the east to the west coast. It was invigorating to see you at work in your communities. I thank everyone who has enriched me in my term of office. I shall always be proud to be identified with the VON family. You have shown me that no one can be happy who lives only for herself or himself. I believe that the joy of living comes from immersion in something that we know to be bigger, better, more enduring and worthier than we are. People, ideas, causes -- these offer the one possible escape from the pangs of solitude and the sorrows of aimlessness. The pitiful people are those who elect to be spectators rather than participants; the tragic ones are those sightseers who deliberately turn their backs on the procession of life. The only true happiness, we are told, comes from squandering ourselves for a purpose -- and I have known true happiness in VON!

Helen K. Mussallem, O. C.  
President