

Physiotherapy History in British Columbia - Our Stories

When woven together, our individual stories make up the collective fabric of our history. The history of Physiotherapy goes back a long way...Manipulation dates to at least 2700 BC in China, Massage and tissue mobilization were mentioned by Homer in 1000 BC....and the epidemic of polio in Canada in the forties and fifties, together with the returning of disabled veterans from both world wars were all turning points in the history of physiotherapy. Rather than looking at the world history of Physiotherapy, our committee looked instead at our own history, the last seventy-five years of education, legislation and physiotherapy treatment provided in British Columbia.

The Canadian Physiotherapy Association was formed in 1920. Seven years later, seven Physiotherapists founded the B.C. Branch of CPA in 1927, which in 1978 was renamed the Physiotherapy Association of B.C. (PABC). The licensing body, the Association of Physiotherapists and Massage Practitioners (APMP) was founded in 1945 and later, after separating from the Massage Practitioners, it became the present College of Physical Therapists of B.C. (CPTBC).

The contribution by Mrs. Ruth Fortune, one of the pioneering physiotherapists, to the development of Physiotherapy in B.C. was immense. Ruth qualified in the UK as a Physiotherapist and came to Canada as a war bride in 1946. She lived, worked, taught and volunteered in the Vancouver area for 65 years. She passed away at the age of 98 in 2012 and many therapists whose lives she had touched, wanted to pay tribute to her.

A small group reached out to others in the physiotherapy and occupational therapy communities to plan an event to celebrate Mrs. F's (as she was affectionately known) career. During their planning, Brenda Tillotson, her colleague and lifelong friend, realized there was very little information available about Ruth Fortune's career history or indeed about any of the work done by physiotherapists in BC in the forties, fifties and sixties.

At the memorial on November 17, 2012, Brenda gave a short serious talk on Hospital Physiotherapy Departments in the 50s : "Ruth, Department Head over 3 decades" about how physiotherapy services were usually housed in the basement, with no authority, no funding for education and little recognition It was followed by Brenda's amusing tales illustrating how Ruth's strength, calmness, sense of fun and encouragement was instrumental in moving our profession out of the basement and into the eyes of the public as a viable resource. "Remembering Ruth" was a memorable event as people talked animatedly and reminisced with past colleagues. It was agreed by all that more work should be done to capture and document stories about our physiotherapy history in British Columbia.

After the memorial, Brenda Tillotson brought together a small advisory group with the intention of preparing a brief to send to the CPA. She contacted PABC, CPTBC, CPA and wrote to Dr. Nicholls of The New Zealand Physiotherapy Association (NZPT), Chairman of the NZ Physiotherapy History Working group. She reached out to the UK Chartered Society of Physiotherapy (CSP) to Dr. Barbara Richardson who was Chairman of the Oral History Working

Group and who had worked for a short time for Canadian Arthritis and Rheumatism Society (CARS) in B.C. in the seventies. Brenda also connected with the Retired Surrey Teachers Association (RSTA) Oral History Working Group.

In 2014, despite failing health, Brenda sent her brief to CPA with a proposal for a Virtual Archive of Canadian Physiotherapy History. A member of her committee, Patricia Grohne, visited Brenda in hospital in the last few days of her life and promised to continue her work to fulfill Brenda's vision, a promise taken very seriously.

How could we capture the history of both the Licensing (CPTBC) and the Professional (PABC) Bodies in British Columbia as not all physiotherapists were members of CPA?

As a way of reaching out to the entire community of Retired Physiotherapists, Marilyn Atkins, Margaret Homonnay, Agnes Jackman, Fatima Inglis and Patricia Grohne set up the Retired Physiotherapists Group in 2014. It was agreed to form a Social Group called the Retired Physiotherapists Group (RPG) of B.C. and to meet once a year. Since that first year of 2014, the RPG have continued to get together for an annual lunch, which has become a way to meet up with former colleagues and renew old friendships.

From this group, a small task force began to explore the ways our history could be preserved and to develop a vision whereby the many aspects of the growth over the years might be recorded for posterity. Researching the PABC Archives we found many documents were missing and we decided that to augment current archives, we needed to collect more archival materials, namely; Oral Histories, Written Contributions, the History of Facilities, and the History of Divisions and Special Interest Groups.

It became clear that over the years the practice of our profession had changed in many ways: there were changes in education, contexts, political mandates, funding, medication advances, community resources, etc. These have all affected what we do. We realized that the current generation of therapists have no concept of where their role as today's practicing Health Care professionals has come from. Only our doyens had the memories and experiences which could provide that information.

With a framework for the project in place, it was obvious that the support of the Physiotherapy Association of British Columbia (PABC) would be key. Fortunately, the Board and Executive Director at the time invested in the challenge. They provided the group with both office support and a small budget. With the help of Patricia Grohne, Rhona Burslem, Rebecca Tunnacliffe (then CEO of PABC) and the PABC Board, the Physiotherapy History of BC (PTHBC) was set up in 2014. "Physiotherapy in British Columbia: Our History" - a joint project between the Retired Physiotherapists Group and PABC was born. This was our mandate:

"The purpose of the PTHBC Committee is to safeguard the history of the valuable work contributed by pioneer Physiotherapists in BC whilst memories and materials are still accessible and to ensure that the best systems are in place to continue the archiving for future generations."

Rhona Burslem and Patricia Grohne became co-chairs of an Advisory Committee. The PTHBC Advisory Group members were Agnes Jackman, Bruce Clark, Charlotte Burns, Hilary Crowley (Prince George), Janice Masur, Jillian Scarth, Joan Johnston, Karen van der Hoop, Margaret Warcup (Terrace), Nancy Cho, Pamela Jeacocke, Patricia Grohne, Rhona Burslem, Sheila Benwell Veuger and Therese Lord. Rhona became the Oral History Coordinator and Patricia undertook to seek Written Contributions.

Therese Lord focused her efforts on creating a history of the B.C. Orthopaedic Division and by reaching out to manual therapists across the decades amassed an enormous amount of information and a clear accounting of the development of the division; it is well done and was a marathon task.

Rhona Burslem's remit was to develop a process by which the treasure trove of oral recollections could be recorded in a way that was spontaneous and unique to the individual. Our concern from the outset was that the recordings should be of archival quality and that when saved they should be searchable by content. Discussion took place with a sound engineer and with a museum curator to ensure that our recordings would meet these standards.

We developed an infrastructure to support the 'interviews' which included locating therapists who would be willing to share their memories, fully informing them about the project and obtaining legal consent for the use of the material that was generated.

Our storytellers were mostly in a senior age group and it was important that he/she was completely comfortable with the process. Most of the recordings were made in their own homes; the 'interviews' themselves were more of a conversation. The 'Listener' facilitated the flow of memories there was no 'question and answer' format. Prior to the recording the 'listener' spent some time identifying the career path of the storyteller and at the beginning of the recording introduced the therapist with these details.

All the introductory details of each recording were consistently the same. When the interview was completed each recording was reviewed and the content was noted with time stamping to facilitate any subsequent search of the content. All of the recorded material was retained, none of the recordings were edited. It was our intent that the groundwork we put in place to ensure a consistent, reproducible format for the interviews could be shared by others who might be interested in developing a similar project.

All of the therapists who gave us their time and told us their stories were happy and grateful to us for honouring their careers - and quite often amazed at the memories of things they hadn't thought of for years, the satisfaction, fun and the laughter that they had had. For us it was an honour and a privilege to share the memories.

Patricia Grohne became the liaison between the Retired Physiotherapists Group (RPG) and the working physiotherapists in the various CPA Divisions and work began to collect the stories of our history. Working with a Lawyer and an Archivist, we developed a permission form, to be signed by our contributors, to allow posting of their writing online. Displays at the BC Physio. Forums and at the RPG Luncheons attracted interest. We reached out by phone and email asking

for contributions and sought both documents and photos from the retired physiotherapists' own collections. We knew that we needed to work fast. "The Five D's": Downsizing, Deafness, Diminished Vision, Dementia and, last but not least, Death, were leaving very few physiotherapists able to tell or write stories about their work in the 40's, 50's and 60's. Each career story was told differently, some were long, and some were short. Some were annotated resumes. All of their stories gave us a glimpse into the physiotherapists' past working lives.

Happily, and to our relief, we uncovered archive boxes tucked away in people's basements and archive materials at PABC, CPTBC, the City of Vancouver Archives, UBC, UNBC, HSA and in private collections. Thirty-seven Physiotherapists submitted their career stories to PTHBC and twenty-one recorded their stories as oral history. Paper Archives are stored at the PABC office. Digital/Oral material is stored and accessible "in the Cloud".

We are so grateful to the Physiotherapists from British Columbia whose memories have helped all of us to recall how our profession has grown and changed over the decades. We strongly believe that remembering our past can help us to move effectively into our future. Rudyard Kipling once said, "If history were taught in the form of stories, it would never be forgotten."

It was once only a dream, but now "Our Physiotherapy History of B.C." can be found at 'About Us' on the PABC website <bcphysio.org>

And...in 2019, Ruth Fortune was named as one of the 25 of History's Greatest Physiotherapists by the International Physiotherapy History Association <history.physio>.

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