

Report on CURAC Annual Conference

As you may recall, the Annual Conference of the College and University Retiree Associations of Canada was held this past week (May 20-22) in Kingston, hosted by the Retiree Association of Queen's. York was well represented as YURA Co-Chairs John Lennox and Jane Crescenzi, outgoing CURAC President Sandra Pyke and newly elected CURAC Board member (and ARFL Secretary) Fred Fletcher were there, in addition to myself as the voting delegate from ARFL.

The focus of attention on the first substantive day of the Conference (following a reception on the afternoon of May 20) was the health of seniors. Dr. Chris Simpson, current President of the Canadian Medical Association, addressed the issue of a national seniors' strategy for health, recognizing that the population of seniors will double in the next decade and a half, while the population over age 80 will quadruple in the same time frame. He stressed the importance of improvements in three areas – long-term care, homecare (including what he called “upstream care” or illness and injury prevention) and support for caregivers. He called for greater integration of home, community and medical professionals in creating a better health system, as well as involvement of all levels of government. He also noted the need to incorporate broader socio-economic policy in developing healthier communities. We have long known that home care can be less expensive and more effective than hospitalization for seniors with chronic conditions (though we should not rely on exploitation of home caregivers to produce cost effectiveness). Why then have we not produced more effective homecare programmes? Dr. Simpson asserted a need to examine best practices in other jurisdictions, and he cited the Danish example in particular as one where he believes an effective homecare system has been developed. Better attention to health promotion, mental health treatment and palliative care were also areas where he asserted Canada could improve, and he ended by pointing us to the CMA's “Demand a Plan” programme for seniors' health care improvement (www.demandaplan.ca).

In the later morning, we heard from Dr. Ken Le Clair, Chair of Queen's Division of Geriatric Psychiatry, on the subject of mental health care for seniors. He noted the frequent link between mental and physical health, especially among seniors, and called for a better integration of patients, organizations and citizens in developing the mental health care system. He characterized our present system as 18th Century health care in the 21st Century, with inadequate attention to illness prevention, and a tendency to place the disease and the medical professional ahead of the patient and his/her family. Let us stop asking, “What's the matter with this patient?” and rather ask, “What matters to this patient?” he urged. He pointed to the Mental Health Commission of Canada for guidelines to be pursued: (www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/initiatives-and-projects/mental-health-strategy-canada)

Dr. Le Clair was followed by Dr. Erica Weir (Departments of Medicine and Public Health Services at Queen's), who spoke about a public health perspective on elder care. She noted that in the past public health had been conceived as community medicine, that at present it was seen as population health, but that in the future it might be described as *clinical* public health, adding an individual service dimension not so prevalent to date. Public health units are powerful bodies, she suggested, and could be deployed to improve elder care through the exercise of their tools of reward, coercion, legitimation, and expertise.

The afternoon session was a presentation by Dr. John Smol of Biology at Queen's. His lecture entitled "Living downwind of the Alberta oil sands" largely replicated the presentation he had made at York following the ARFL AGM in November.

The afternoon closed with the CURAC Annual General Meeting.

The evening of the first day was marked by a dinner at which the featured speaker was Jim Leech, the Chancellor of Queen's and co-author of *The Third Rail: Confronting Our Pension Failures*. He outlined the problem posed by the combination of low savings rates and low market returns for future pensions. Savings rates could be increased, he suggested, only with some element of mandatory participation. Thus he argued for the expansion of the Canada Pension Plan. (Some of us wondered if savings rates were lagging because of precarious employment and stagnant wages, but an expanded CPP would at least be portable and would include employer contributions.) He also argued against the flight of private firms from the provision of defined benefit pensions (to defined contribution plans instead). Preferable to defined contribution pensions (where all investment risk is borne by employees), he argued, are hybrid plans which combine a minimum guarantee with an opportunity for better returns when markets allow. Such plans could be affordable for employers if inflation protection were market-based and if the rules for solvency assessment were more realistic. He seemed to be describing a plan very like York's own, and I was somewhat reassured.

Awards presented that evening included a Tribute Award (recognizing exceptional contributions to their own university or to the community) given to York's own Sandra Pyke.

On Friday, we heard from Mr. Glen Vollebregt, President of St. Lawrence CAAT and Dr. Brian Frank, DuPont Canada Chair in Engineering Education, Research and Development, on the future of post-secondary education in the college and university sectors respectively. Mr. Vollebregt concentrated on possible changes in programmes of study and college-university links, while Dr. Frank's focus was on changing pedagogy in university education.

The afternoon was spent in roundtable discussions on numerous topics of interest, including actions CURAC could take in lobbying with respect to health care and pensions, means of recruiting new members and leaders in retiree organizations, and ways to improve communication with members and sister associations.

Next year's Conference will be at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon and 2017's will be at Carleton University in Ottawa.