

Hôtel-Dieu de Québec: the story of Canada's oldest hospital

Bill Trent

The sound of noisy lunchtime conversation mixes with the clatter of trays and dishes in Quebec's Restaurant La Crémaille. But at a table in a far corner of the room, two eminent medical men sit chatting, quietly oblivious of the crowd. They are immersed in a discussion of an operation for breast cancer performed at the Hôtel-Dieu de Québec.

One is Dr. Sylvio LeBlond, one-time professor of medical history at Quebec's Laval University and later, chief of medicine at the Hôtel-Dieu St-Vallier de Chicoutimi. Today, at a spry, still youthful-minded age 82, he is a widely respected writer of historical essays. He has studied and written extensively about the Quebec hospital — and there is very little he can't tell you about it.

The other is Dr. Jean Beaudoin, a quiet, reflective man of 57 who shares Dr. LeBlond's interest. He is former dean of the faculty of medicine at Laval and is now a cardiologist at the Hôtel-Dieu, a Laval teaching hospital. (He headed the department of cardiology for a period during the 1960s.)

"The point is we can't be sure", Dr. Leblond says, peering across a bowl of potato and leek soup. His modulated teacher's voice rises easily above the din. "The question is this: Was it a malignant tumor or was it not?" Dr. Beaudoin nods acknowledgement, then shrugs. The question has no certain, ready-made answer.

They are talking about an operation performed by famed French-born surgeon Dr. Michel Sarrazin de l'Etang. The patient, a nun named Soeur Barbier of the Congrè-

gation de Notre-Dame, not only survived the operation but went on to enjoy another 20 years of life, dying eventually of some other ailment.

It's the long remission time that causes Dr. LeBlond to wonder. "You have to ask yourself, Was it really cancer?", he says. The discussion is all very theoretical. The operation in question took place nearly 300 years ago — in the year 1700, to be precise.

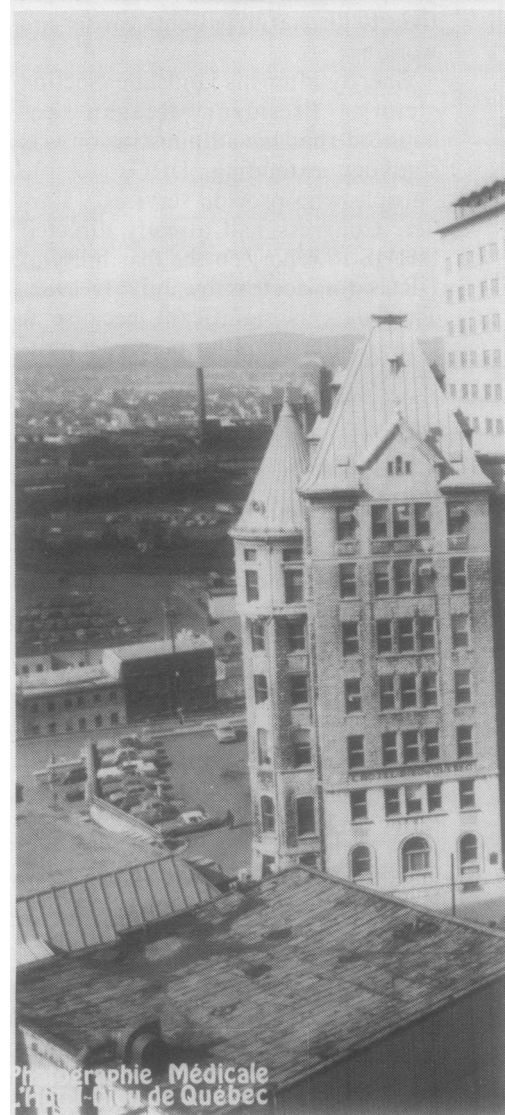
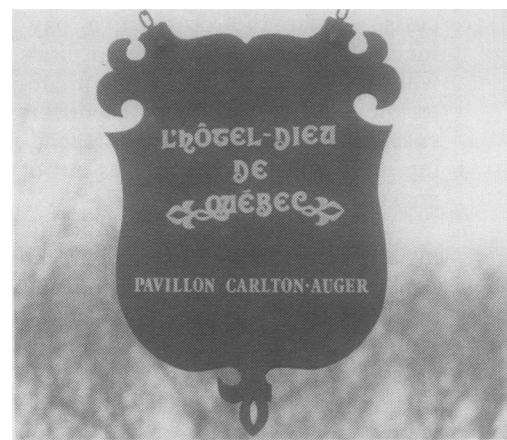
The man who performed it was one of the great medical talents of the late 17th and early 18th centuries and a familiar figure in the operating room of the Hôtel-Dieu. His was an age of barber-surgeons, when practically anyone who could shave a beard believed he could also make a surgical incision. But he was no such quack. He was a graduate of medicine from the university in Rouen, France and an experienced surgeon.

It may all seem like archaic information in a world of nuclear medicine and organ transplantation but Dr. Michel Sarrazin is holding his own very nicely at the Hôtel-Dieu, thank you. His picture occupies a place of honour in the nuns' museum, and it's surprising how often his name comes up in conversation.

Dr. LeBlond rates him as one of the two most famous doctors of the French regime (with Dr. Jean-François Gaultier). "He cared for the sick with ability and devotion", he says.

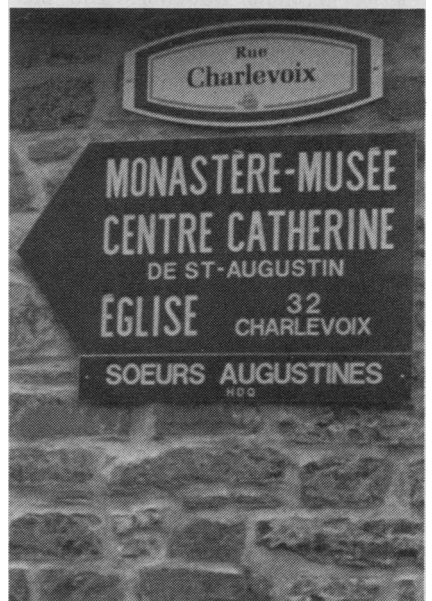
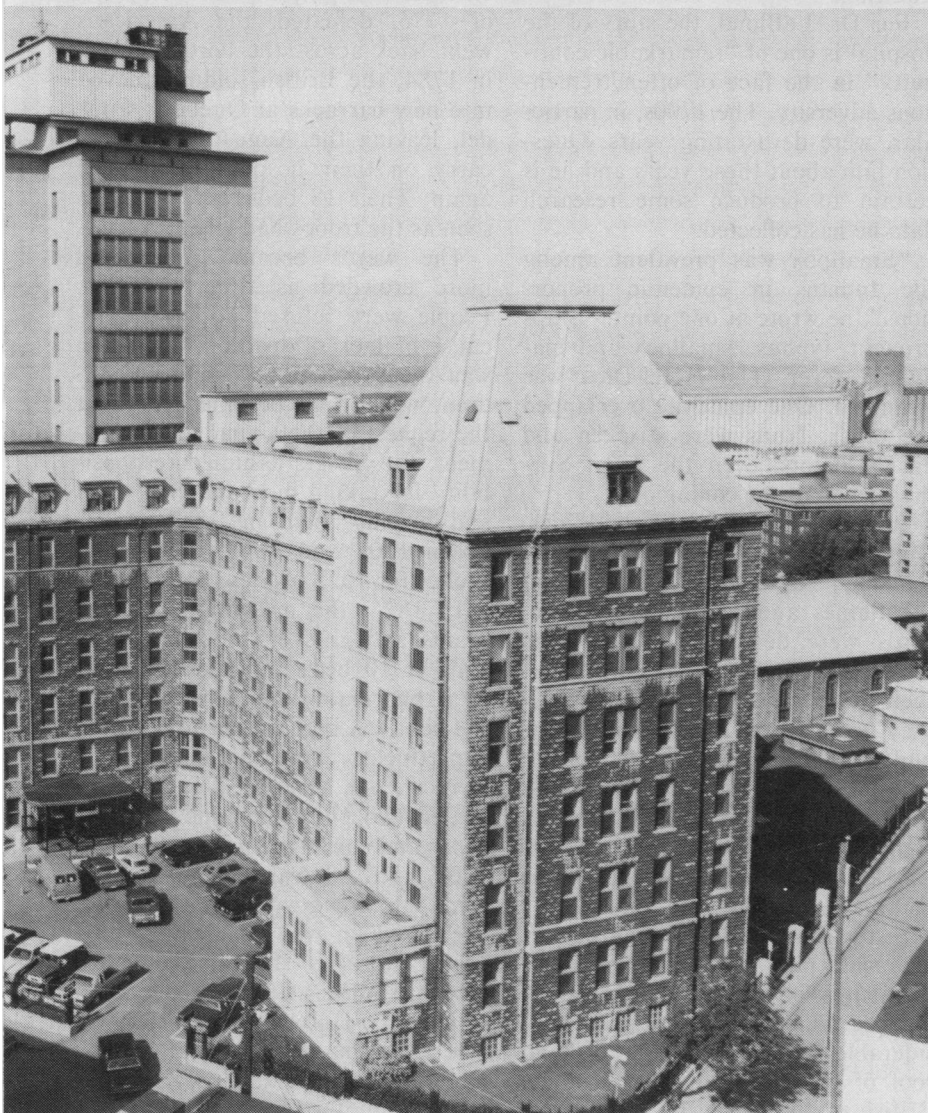
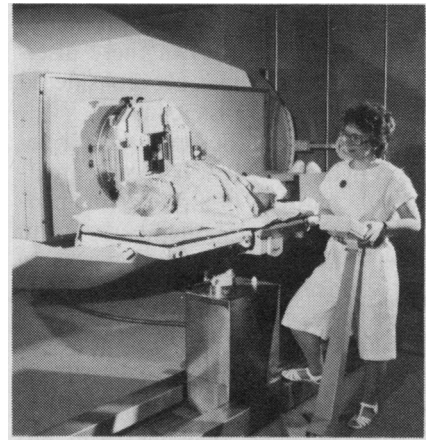
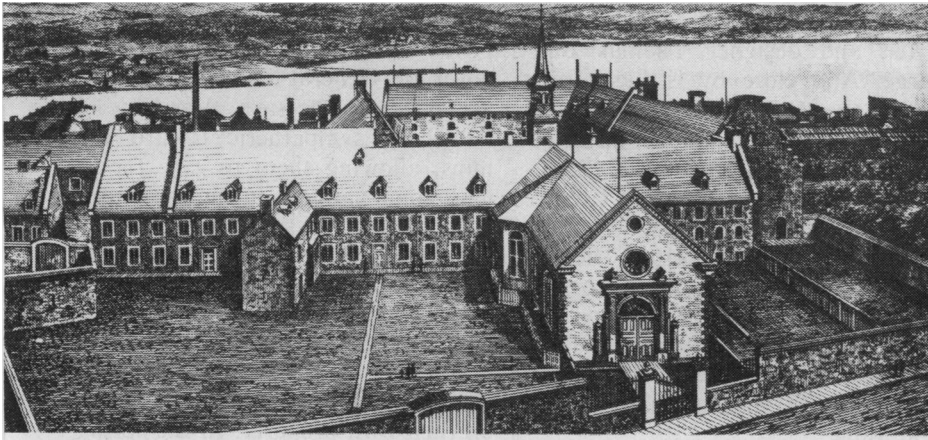
Dr. Sarrazin's writings on the flora and fauna of Canada are still valuable today, he continues. He was a particularly ardent student of the flora and its healing properties, using several plants as decoctions or infusions — the *Aralia Canadense*, for instance, useful in the healing of indolent ulcers and the *Astor Corona* as an emetic and a purgative. You don't find data like that tucked away in files of an ordinary hospital.

But then the Hôtel-Dieu de Québec is not an ordinary hospital. It's



where hospitalization as we know it began in Canada. In fact, it makes a wider claim than that. It is the oldest hospital in North America — the oldest, that is, "north of Mexico", as its brochures are careful to indicate. Founded in 1639 by an order of French hospitalers, the cloistered Augustines de l'Hôtel-

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surrounded by a palisade to protect it from Indian attack, to a sprawl of modern-day buildings covering an area of some 4300 sq m. The hospital and adjoining Augustine monastery are still located on the original concession from the Compagnie de la Nouvelle-France which administered the colony. It's a parcel of prime land, a stone's throw from busy rue Saint-Jean within the old city walls, an area referred to now as *le vieux Québec*.

The institution, run entirely by the Augustines for more than three centuries but since the 1960s operated by lay professionals in keeping with government reform of health care services, is today one of Canada's major general hospitals. It is a centre that has distinguished itself in many ways over the years, most dramatically perhaps in the treat-

Dieu de Dieppe is 345 years old this year. (The nuns abandoned the cloister some 20 years ago, to the pleasure of some and the chagrin of others.)

It is the oldest of five historic French hospitals established in the three principal centres of population in the wilderness of 17th century

New France. The others were the Hôtel-Dieu de Montréal (or Ville-Marie as it was then called), built in 1644; the Hôpital Général de Québec, 1692; the Hôpital Général de Montréal, 1694; and the Hôtel-Dieu de Trois Rivières, 1697.

The Hôtel-Dieu de Québec has grown from a tiny wood structure,

ment of cancer and renal problems. Its research facilities in these disciplines, for example, are considered among the best in the country.

Its reputation, however, didn't develop overnight. It was the culmination of centuries of striving for medical excellence by members of an order whose sole dedication was to the welfare of the sick. The Augustines have always cherished their hospital and have kept ample records of their achievements. Their archives fairly bulge with history.

Sister Hélène Boucher, who has served the hospital for 40 years and who is in charge of its museum, and Sister Claire Gagnon, the archivist, a 30-year veteran, chuckle when asked about early treatments for disease.

Where else but at the Hôtel-Dieu would you find Abbé Complain's cure for cankers? He gave it to the nurses in 1799, on the understanding that they would make it available to the poor free of charge — and that they would exact a fee from the unlucky rich. The treatment, like so many others, began with bloodletting and a purging of the patient. A kind of poultice of oatmeal, put through a strainer and dampened with water, was then applied to the sore and covered. The patient was also put on a diet — soup, a small amount of meat and no alcohol.

The Sisters of the Hôtel-Dieu were well ahead of their time in the 18th century with a cure for the common cold as well. It was a simple, tasty remedy — maple sugar. "It was good for other things too", Sister Boucher explains. "It was supposed to purify the blood."

Visitors trying to find their way through a labyrinth of corridors and passageways to wards and laboratories soon realize this is not a quiet, religious setting but a bustling, pulsating medical centre.

Still, the past is never very far away. It keeps intruding on the present. A 5-minute walk through a series of hallways will take you to the monastery with the original 17th century vaults where the nuns took refuge in times of impending attack. A few more steps and you are in the beautiful monastery church, built in 1800 to replace an earlier one which burned down. The

decor is the work of famed church artist and designer Thomas Bail-largé. And close by is the garden where the three founding Sisters of the hospital, Marie Guenet de Saint-Ignace, Marie Forestier de Saint-Bonaventure and Anne Le Cointre de Saint-Bernard, lie buried.

The history of the Hotel-Dieu is, in a very real sense, the history of Quebec, says Dr. Beaudoin. He adds, "We who have been associated with the hospital have always felt part of that history, part of the tradition."

For Dr. LeBlond, the story of the hospital is one of "remarkable continuity" in the face of often tremendous adversity. The 1700s, in particular, were devastating years. Question him about those years and he is certain to produce some research data he has collected.

"Smallpox was prevalent among the Indians in epidemic proportions", he wrote at one point. "Ships brought typhus, smallpox and malignant fever. The Hotel-Dieu was swamped. One epidemic overlapped the other. Nuns were stricken and died. Doctors, even the great Sarrazin, died of the contagion."

In 1755, fire razed the buildings. Only the walls of the monastery remained standing. A nun died in the flames and many boxes of records were destroyed. The Sisters took refuge with the Ursulines at their nearby convent but in 1757, they were back in new quarters, built on the ruins of the former buildings. Two years later, in 1759, the sisters faced up to a new threat: General Wolfe had brought his British fleet up the St. Lawrence River and the siege of Quebec was on.

Sister Boucher points to a neatly-arranged pile of cannon balls — mementos of the bombardment of Quebec which had resulted in considerable damage to the walls and roof of the Augustines' new home. British troops moved into the centre after the conquest, occupying part of the parlour, first as a hospital, then as a barracks.

It was, of course, an encroachment on the nursing community, but Sister Boucher nods solemnly and says, "The soldiers acted very well." As a museum person she has associated herself so intimately with history that she talks of events of centu-

ries ago as though they had happened only recently. The new British governor, General Murray, had been a good man, she says. Actually, he had been sympathetic toward the nuns, allowing them to care for at least some patients during the hospital occupation.

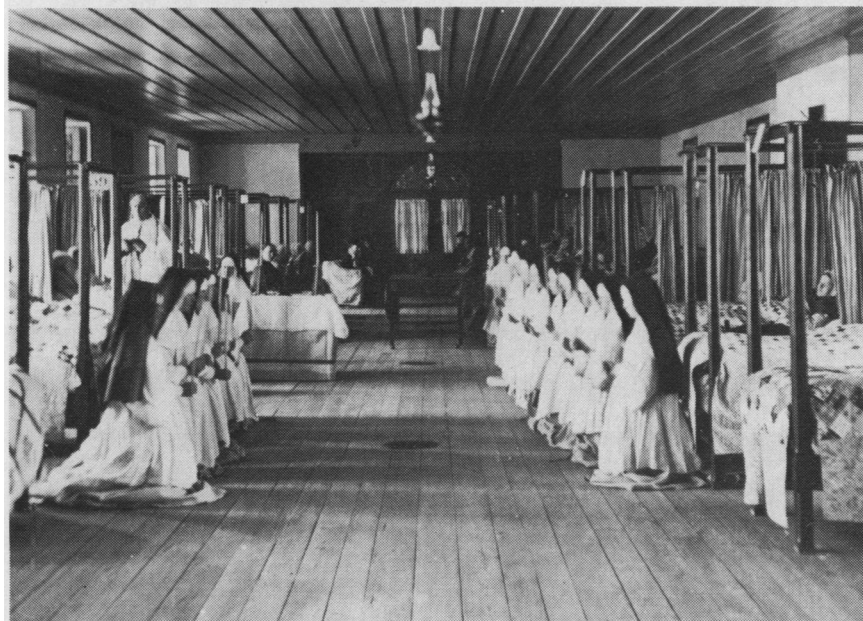
In 1775, Quebec was again under siege, this time by the Americans under Generals Arnold and Montgomery. Murray's troops remained quartered among the Augustines, thus providing protection for them on their own property. In the spring of 1776, defeated, the Americans went back across the border. Then, in 1784, the British soldiers moved into new barracks at Quebec's Citadel, leaving the Augustines free to carry on their hospital work once again. Their 18 beds were filled as soon as the troops had left.

The wards became more and more crowded as time went on. People were refused admission because of lack of space. Then, there was the problem of homeless children, which had become acute. At the request of the Canadian government, the Sisters assumed responsibility for taking in abandoned waifs and placing them in families. Between 1801 and 1845, they found shelter for 1375 of these children.

In 1825, the institution received grants and gifts enabling it to add another 10 beds and such facilities as a pharmacy and dispensary for the poor. At that time, two separate departments were organized, one medical, one surgical. The staff included two physicians and two surgeons and consultants.

By 1852, Laval University had come into being with three faculties, one of which was medicine. Three years later, its students could do clinical studies at two Quebec institutions, the Hôtel-Dieu and the Marine and Emigration Hospital. The Hôtel-Dieu's teaching program has gone on uninterrupted to this day.

As medical science progressed and the population grew, the hospital expanded. By 1870, there were 80 beds. In 1892, the Pavillon d'Aiguillon (named after a niece of history's famous Cardinal Richelieu, the Duchess of Aiguillon, who first proposed establishment of a hospital in Quebec) opened, giving the institution a total of 100 beds. In 1931,



two other wings were completed, the Pavillons Richelieu and Précieux-Sang. Beds now numbered 375. In 1960, a 14-storey tower replaced the old d'Auguillon building, bringing the number of beds to 578. Finally, in 1970, the Pavillon Carlton-Auger went into operation as a radiation therapy centre with another 99 beds.

In 1948, Dr. LeBlond paid special tribute to the Sisters in a paper read to the CMA's section of historical medicine in Toronto. Concluding the reading, he said, "That is briefly the epic of the pioneers to whom the Hôtel-Dieu of Quebec, and Canada as a whole, are so greatly indebted. The same spirit of 1639 has gone down through the ages...." He added that that spirit had "unflinchingly faced danger and untold obstacles with faith, courage, vision and loyalty".

The Augustines had written an epic page of history, indeed. They had ministered to the Indians, tended to the wounded, both French and English, in the battle of the Plains of Abraham, nursed the injured in the American invasion and fought a running battle with pestilence for more than 300 years.

But there were signs of change on the medical horizon. Medical and support staff at the Hôtel-Dieu had grown to the point where lay employees outnumbered religious staff members. Emphasis was shifted then to trained qualified personnel and to organizing a more efficient administrative structure. The School of Nurses and the hospital associations, acting through the School of Hospital Administration, helped promote those objectives. By the late 1950s, however, it was apparent the hospital sector needed new impetus.

Until 1960, private initiatives by the Augustines and other orders had succeeded in maintaining essential services to the population. But hospitals were carrying heavier patient loads, costs were getting out of hand, and clearly there were problems in providing adequate care.

A visitors' introductory brochure about the hospital sums it up this

Sister Hélène Boucher offers visitors a glimpse into the past in the monastery's museum; the Augustines had written an epic page of history indeed. They had ministered to the Indians, tended to the wounded, both French and English . . .

way: "Despite the prodigious work performed in the past, the devotion and generosity of the religious orders no longer could suffice. The population expected much more."

The 1960s went down as the decade of government intervention in the field of health care. In 1961, hospital insurance was introduced. The following year, the Hospitals Act initiated a plan to reorganize hospital administration to ensure quality service. In 1970, health insurance came in, thus completing Quebec's plan for no-cost care for every citizen.

The hospital's traditional program of charity and assistance was over. The Hôtel-Dieu, the brochure makes clear, had "moved into the domain of social justice and the universality of the right to health care".

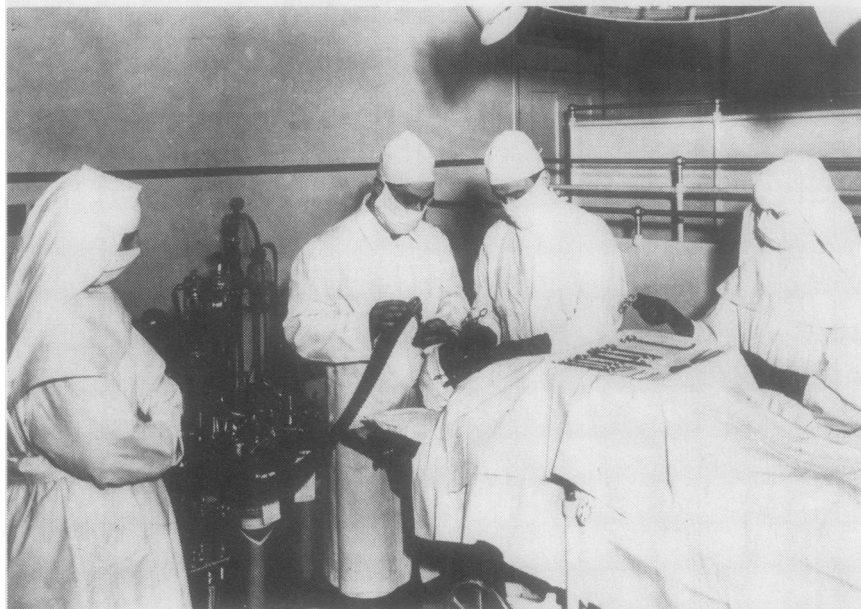
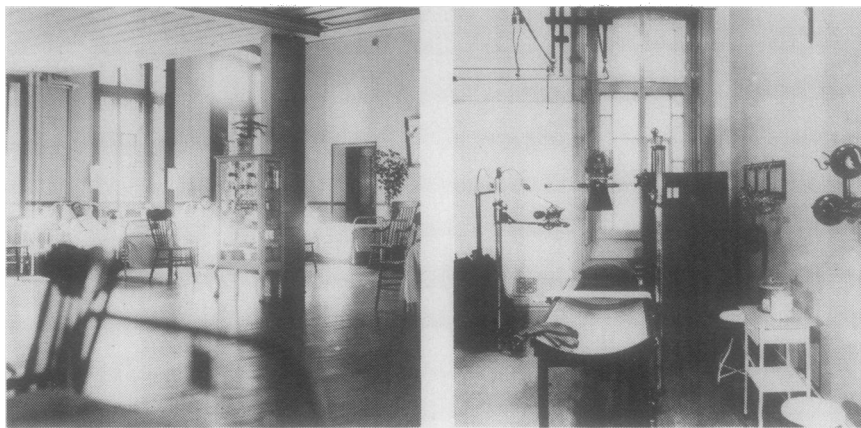
It was the end of an era for the Augustines at the Hôtel-Dieu. The Quebec government moved quickly to enact legislation acknowledging the separate legal existence of two bodies — the community of nuns on the one hand and the hospital on the other. Their hospital now would function as a lay institution. In 1965, they abandoned their cloistered way of life. No longer would they be secluded, cut off from the rest of the world behind the old walnut-panelled monastery door. In 1967, they exchanged their long, flowing white habits for newly-approved shorter, less ecclesiastical-looking dresses.

The changes didn't occur without reaction from the nuns, for whom it had been an emotional time. There were protests. Some went as far as to accuse the government of "stealing" their hospital.

The turmoil has long since died down. Today, the dozen or so Sisters who work at the hospital are trained nurses who have all the qualifications of their profession and who work side by side with their lay counterparts.

The Augustines have dwindled in number but this has nothing to do with changes in hospital structures.

In 1970 the hospital's traditional program of charity and assistance was over. It was the end of an era for the Augustines. As medical science progressed, the hospital expanded. By 1931, the Pavilions Richelieu and Précieux-Sang were completed (bottom).



Sister Gagnon shakes her head sadly when she reflects on the matter. "Recruitment", she says. "This is the problem today." The fact is that the religious life is not attracting the number of young women it once did.

If the Sisters are getting few in number, however, and if they have lost much of their relevance as hospital administrators, they still are dear to the hearts of many of the older doctors who once served alongside them.



Individual dealings have been replaced by a new multi-disciplinary approach to patient care.

You have to sit in conversation with two long-practising doctors like Jean Beaudoin and the Hôtel-Dieu's former chief of pathology, Jean-Louis Bonenfant, to understand the relationship. "There was a harmonious mix", Dr. Beaudoin says. "For many of us, the hospital was a kind of second family. We had a feeling of belonging to something."

Dr. Bonenfant recalls the Christmas season visits to the parlour. The cloistered nuns had favourites among the doctors and expected them to visit *en famille*. "We would go to the monastery with our children and talk to them, unseen, through a grill", he explains. "Then, before we left, they would pass candies out to the youngsters. Our visits were important. We were expected to make them."

Dr. Beaudoin is among the first to admit that much of the old personal, family feeling is gone, swept away

by a dynamic new multi-disciplinary approach to patient care. And for some, among the older doctors, there has been the often difficult problem of adjusting to new blood, of learning to live with a generation of bright, younger colleagues.

Dr. Juan Friede is one of those younger men. He is 40, a native of Colombia who became a Canadian citizen 15 years ago. He is president of the prodigious Conseil des médecins et dentistes and chief of the department of nuclear medicine. He

wasn't at the hospital during its religious tenure but has done his historical homework.

"The hospital was a very simple place then", he points out. "It was run like a large house. Or hotel. One of the Sisters would buy the community produce directly from a farmer she knew on the Ile d'Orleans. Today... I don't know.... It might take seven people to handle that kind of buying."

You can't run a big general hospital that way today, he says. Sure, there is bureaucracy but then the nature of medicine is becoming increasingly complex. Each system fits its own historic period. What the religious community did worked for its time. Today, another concept does. Necessarily, priorities change. There was a time when the individual doctor was God when he brought his patient into hospital. That has changed. "Now a patient may be

seen by 20 or 30 professionals", he explains. "This is good. It makes it easier to catch errors."

The Hôtel-Dieu has an impressive roster of specialists. People like Dr. Jacques Laverdière, for example, who, at age 43, may be regarded as another member of the new generation. Born in Quebec's Montmagny county, he joined the hospital in 1971. As chief of radiation therapy, he is a key figure in the fight against cancer.

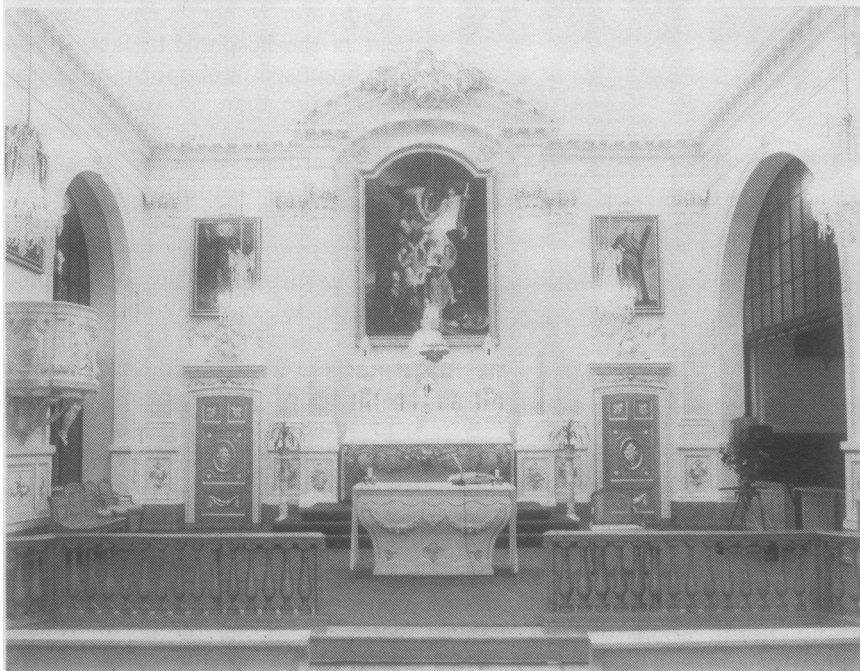
It is worth noting that the Hôtel-Dieu has been recognized officially by both Quebec's Ministry of Social Affairs and Laval University as having a *vocation cancer*. It is an integrated centre, equipped as a treatment and research facility, where 2000 new cases of cancer are treated every year. Radiation therapy is one of its major programs.

Radiation is not a new development in the hospital. In fact, it has been practised in one form or another for more than 50 years. But its function has expanded dramatically. Dr. Laverdière is proud to report that today the institution is responsible for providing therapy for cancer patients from all over Quebec, east of Trois-Rivières. They are accommodated in the Pavillon Carlton Auger where, last year, 2600 patients were treated and 8400 follow-ups recorded. Radiation, he says, is being used extensively as a replacement for surgery in cases of breast cancer.

Dr. Yves Warren, age 51, born at Pointe-au-Pic on the St. Lawrence north shore and a descendant of a soldier who came to Quebec with Wolfe in 1759, is another man who finds himself in a focal position. He holds the post of senior nephrologist.

The renal service is the hospital's other special vocation and, as is the case with the cancer division, it provides care for the people of eastern Quebec. It includes a hemodialysis section, a transplantation department, a clinical and metabolic research unit and an arterial hypertension clinic. The Hôtel-Dieu is the only institution providing teaching in all of these areas for students of Laval.

Dr. Warren says the Hôtel-Dieu is the biggest single kidney transplantation centre in Quebec. Over the last 12 years, 301 operations



Built in 1800, the beautiful monastery church replaced an earlier one that burned down.

have been performed. He cites a 96.5% survival rate for 1 year, and an 89.3% rate over 10 years. In addition, the hospital has provided home dialysis services to referred patients from points as far away as the Iles de la Madeleine and Fort George on James Bay.

One of the younger men is Dr. Michel Vallières, age 37, a native Quebecer and a graduate of Laval. He is also coordinator of university programs at the hospital, a job that lets him observe students from both

sides of the professional fence.

In November of last year, hospital heads gathered for an important event — the formal inauguration of their cancer and renal research centre by Social Affairs Minister Pierre-Marc Johnson. What they applauded was no small, insignificant operation. It included 15 doctors and career researchers supervising 50 people working in 12 teams, with an operating budget of more than \$2 million. It also involved 23 graduate and postgraduate students

training to become researchers.

Those who observed during the ceremony that the Hôtel-Dieu had come a long way over the years could be forgiven for stating the obvious. But yes, come to think of it, it had indeed come a long way.

Patients once had to walk into it through a palisade gate in the wilderness. Today, they enter through electronic doors a few steps away from busy, bustling Côte-du-Palais.

As late as 1784, the sisters could boast of only 18 beds. Today, according to figures released by Robert Côté, assistant director-general, the Hôtel-Dieu has 640: 487 for general patients, 54 for chronic cases and 99 for people undergoing cancer treatment. During the year 1983-1984, 10 685 people were hospitalized. The total number of days of hospital care was 163 983.

The Hôtel-Dieu is a 345-year-old success story. How it has managed to remain successful against seemingly impossible odds for so long is anybody's guess. The doctors will tell you it's a matter of excellence. The hospital has never allowed its standards to slip. Dr. Jean-Marie Loïselle, head of medical biology, thinks teamwork has a lot to do with it.

When the committee he heads went looking for research funds for cancer work, Hôtel-Dieu doctors and researchers were the first to contribute.

Sixty and white-haired, a Quebec-born graduate of Laval's medical school with a PhD in biochemistry from McGill, Dr. Loïselle has the enthusiasm and drive of a professional fund raiser. "Do you know how much we want to raise?", he asks. "A million dollars." He waves an index finger in emphasis. "By 1992." The money will go into research and teaching at both Hôtel-Dieu and Laval.

"You see", he says, "we are all very proud of being part of the Hôtel-Dieu." He smiles and adds, "There are some doctors outside who are jealous of us."

Jealous? Of what? He shrugs. Of the hospital's accomplishments, perhaps. Of its venerable age. They have even given it a nickname. They call it the Hôtel-des-dieux, the hospital of the gods. Dr. Loïselle has no intention of arguing the point. ■