Calgary General Hospital #4 Opens its Doors.

(Deb Lee, adapted from February ‘24 article in Bridges)

With significant population growth after WW2 there was increasing demand for more hospital beds in the city. By 1947 the City, who owned and administered the hospital, gained the approval of the ratepayers of Calgary for $3 million dollars to build a new Calgary General Hospital in Bridgeland. The CGH #3 remained in use until it was demolished in 1959.

Under the leadership of a new hospital administrator Dr. L.O Bradley, it took several years of planning and construction before the hospital was ready to open its doors. This modern 7 storey building, with three separate wings would accommodate 582 patients.

It was an exciting day for the city as the Calgary General Hospital #4 opened on March 3 1953. Both the “Calgary Albertan” and “Calgary Herald” had multi-page coverage. Articles marvelled at the modern new facility with features like permanent curtains between beds (rather than movable screens), air suction-based mop shakers and garbage chutes built into the walls between floors. Outlets for oxygen and carbon dioxide were installed in the walls at the head of each bed. Ward rooms now had a maximum of 6 beds. The entire 2nd floor was devoted to children’s care. Lab, X-ray and operating rooms were all in one wing and a new outpatient department was located on the main floor . Purchase of an electrocardiograph machine and mobile X-ray machine allowed for progressive diagnostics to be completed. Providing heat to the buildings was a steam-based power plant with three Foster Wheeler boilers which were reputed to be clean and very efficient.

These features may not seem like much to us these days but they truly were a reflection of the major advances and rising standards for health care that were occurring in the 1950’s. The penicillin ‘wonder drug’ and various surgical advances were changing the trajectory of health care. These advancements also came in to use before the days of Medicare. Patients at CGH #4 paid for their hospital stays - $8.25 per day for a ward bed, $10.50 for semi-private and $13.00 for a private room plus, additional fees for any surgical operations they required. These costs were a hardship for lower income Calgarians, leaving the city to subsidize the budget deficits.

Lieutenant-Governor JJ Bowlen officiated at the March 3rd ceremony for Calgary’s big new hospital, with Mayor McKay and many of Calgary’s influential people attending. A symbolic golden key, donated by Birks Jewellers, opened the door to the hospital. The Nurses choir sang “ Bless this House”. Following the ceremony, there were tours of the building, led by members of the CGH Nurses Alumni . A buffet supper in the cafeteria, hosted by members of the Women’s Auxiliary completed the event. Over the next few days, tours throughout the new hospital were arranged for Calgary residents and 20,000 people attended. Everyone was very proud of their new hospital. It was a memorable time and soon afterward, the big job of transferring patients from the old hospital to the new began.