VON celebrates 100th anniversary

The CMA has extended congratulations to the Victorian Order of Nurses, which marked 100 years of community nursing in Canada during National VON week in January. Perhaps best known for its in-home care, the VON's 7000 nurses visit thousands of Canadian homes each year to provide general nursing, palliative care, intravenous therapies, care for new mothers and postsurgery patients, and other services. Health promotion and support services are other important functions. Its second century will bring unprecedented challenges, the VON said in a news release, as cuts to health care funding force more sick and recovering patients into the community without a corresponding budget increase for home and community care.

Links between suicide, peacekeeping duty probed

Peacekeeping experience by itself does not appear to increase the overall rate of suicide in the Canadian military, a study commissioned by the Department of National Defence (DND) has determined. However, a team of researchers led by Dr. Isaac Sakinofsky, head of the High Risk Consultation Clinic at Toronto's Clarke Institute of Psychiatry, concluded that the demands of being a soldier exert unique stresses that may contribute to psychiatric illness and suicide in individual cases. The Canadian forces, which currently has about 60 000 members, reported 66 suicides between January 1990 and July 1995; one-third of victims had peacekeeping experience.

The Clarke Connection newsletter recently reported that of cases in which psychiatric disorders could be established, most peacekeepers who committed suicide had depression (41%) or adjustment disorder (55%), while 38% had alcohol and/or drug-abuse problems; only 2 showed evidence of post-traumatic-stress syndrome related to peacekeeping duty. Researchers found that most victims had chronic or acute problems with relationships or legal, financial, medical or work-related issues, or were dissatisfied with military life. As a result of the report, DND has decided that peacekeepers will now have at least 1 year at home between peacekeeping missions, which usually last 6 months. They will also get more stress counselling and have access to more support services.

Patient guide to breast cancer

A 35-page patient guide, *Breast Cancer and You*, has been developed by 10 breast cancer specialists to provide detailed, current information on diagnosis, treatment options and controversies. The publication is intended to be used in conjunction with a physician or surgeon to help the patient participate in treatment decisions. The guide, which first appeared as a special supplement to *Current Oncology*, is available at no charge from the Cancer Information Service (888 939-3333) or the National Breast Cancer Fund (416 544-8487), or call 888 268-1191.

Research Update • Le point sur la recherche

Something fishy in antifreeze for platelets

The barriers to storage of human blood platelets may be overcome with the help of antifreeze proteins from Canadian cod, if trials involving researchers in Newfoundland, Ontario and California bear fruit.

The researchers are studying the possibility that platelets can be kept cold for days or weeks before being reactivated for use in patients. Experiments in the United States have shown that the antifreeze proteins (AFPs) used by fish to retard freezing or lessen its damage can also protect human cells in hypothermic and cryogenic conditions. The structure of an AFP was recently published by researchers at Queen's University, Kingston, Ont. (*Nature* 1996;384:285-8). The authors showed that the unique structure of these globular proteins allows them to bind to ice crystals.

"The thing that is most promising in the medical field has turned out to be use in platelets," explains Dr. Garth Fletcher, founder of A/F Protein Canada Inc., located in Newfoundland, which purifies AFPs from cod purchased from a local aquaculture company and supplies the proteins to researchers. The patent for the medical use of AFPs is held by A/F Protein's parent company in Boston, where the initial experiments were conducted.

Fletcher's firm is working with researchers at McMaster University, Hamilton, Ont., and the University of California, Davis. The next step is testing in animals of platelets cold-stored with the use of AFPs to ensure that the function and ability of the platelets is maintained. In-vivo testing and clinical trials are expected to require 4 to 6 years. — *C.J. Brown*