

Earthquake team finally gets nod to go overseas

When earthquakes jolted Colombia, Turkey, Greece and Taiwan in the first 10 months of 1999, the federal government denied Canada's only specially trained civilian response team permission to go and help. The Vancouver-based Urban Search and Rescue (USAR) team was formed in 1995 by the city of Vancouver and the federal government to deal with large-scale disasters. The 72-person team, which includes 2 physicians, collectively put in almost 7000 hours of training in 1999. In November, 2 members were finally allowed to travel to Turkey to provide help following the latest quake there.

When the first major earthquake of 1999 occurred in Colombia, task-force leader Brian Inglis was told by Emergency Preparedness Canada that "despite the fact that you are funded by the federal government, nobody here knows anything about you and there isn't any agreement or paperwork in place." It was a slap in the face.

The team then pressed for protocols that would allow it to travel to the next disaster. However, when the Turkish earthquake occurred a few months later, phone calls to Ottawa were not returned. "The silence was almost deafening, and morale went down very quickly," says Inglis. "We had gear sitting in a trailer ready to go to the airport." Adding to USAR's frustration were efforts by several private organizations, such as World Vision Canada, to fund the team's travel to Turkey. Money has "never been an issue," says Inglis, but political and legal support from Ottawa is required before the team can go abroad.

Following the Taiwan earthquake in September 1999, there was again no contact from Ottawa until 3 days after the event, when Raymond Chan, a BC member of Parliament and secretary of state, phoned Inglis. Although Chan was "disturbed" that the team hadn't been sent to Taiwan, he later told the media that it did not meet UN standards because it didn't own camping equipment — equipment that USAR has arranged to obtain rapidly from

emergency-service agencies. "It doesn't slow us down getting to the airport," says Inglis. "We have a 6-hour mobilization time."

Finally, with the help of the provincial emergency program, agencies in Ottawa have "turned 180 degrees," and a memorandum of agreement was to be signed with the federal government,

outlining team responsibilities in the event of another earthquake. Inglis says he is now "very confident" that USAR will be able to help during future disasters. He remains philosophical about the hurdles his team has overcome. "It's always an education dealing with the federal government." — *Heather Kent, Vancouver*

MD tickled by eagle feather

A University of Toronto professor has been honoured with an eagle feather. It is considered one of the highest tributes in native culture, in which the feather is a symbol of strength and discipline. "It's a great honour," said Dr. Chandrakant Shah.

Shah, a professor in the Department of Public Health Sciences at the U of T, has helped support native Canadians' quest for appropriate health care for 25 years. "I'm a visible minority," he said, "and I've always been interested in marginalized groups."

Shah, a pediatrician and internist with a master's degree in public health, began his involvement by providing medical services in Sioux Lookout, Ont., for 1, and then 3, weeks a year. "Homelessness, child poverty, unemployment — these are the health problems of the marginalized," he said. In 1989 he realized that the community was looking to him for solutions, and launched an annual Visiting Lectureship on Native Health. Each year, 3 weeks of public lectures are delivered by native speakers to listeners from hospitals, public health groups, high schools and universities; 90% of those attending the lectures are university students. Shah's goal is to heighten sensitivity and maybe even incite action.

"If we are to promote self-determination or aboriginal rights we need champions outside the community," says Shah, who also works 2 half-days a week at Toronto's Anishnawbe Community Health Centre. The lectures and forum also help stop "the cycle of misinformation."

That's precisely what attracted lecturer Jim Morris, deputy grand chief for the Nishnawbe-Aski Nation, a Northern Ontario political organization linking 50 First Nation groups. "The most important thing is to educate urban mainstream Canadians about Aboriginal people, history, culture and health status," says Morris. "We are changing perceptions." During his week as the visiting lecturer he made about a dozen presentations. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*



Lillian McGregor, elder-in-residence at the University of Toronto's First Nations House, presents Dr. Chandrakant Shah with an eagle feather