

Saviour of lives

Nothing fires Dr. William Gunn's imagination like a disaster. The 75-year-old Canadian surgeon has seen it all, and more, during his 35 years as head of Emergency Relief Operations at the World Health Organization (WHO) and as a UN consultant. His work has ranged from developing disaster-training programs and writing a dictionary of disaster and humanitarian medicine to creating huge emergency medicine kits. He also found time to write 8 books. "I like the smell of printers' ink," he says. In addition, he cofounded the BC Health Historical Society and coedited the *BC Medical Journal*.

The Swiss-educated surgeon first gained experience during the Springhill, NS, mining disaster of 1958 that killed 74 coal miners. Later he helped out during 2 West Coast disasters, including a sea surge on Vancouver Island. "It was a bit of a Band-Aid approach," he says of the response to natural and other disasters 40 years ago. "When it happened we went and did what we could — not much."

Thus he added disaster medicine to a growing list of interests, and in 1967 WHO asked him what role it could play in disaster medicine. He went to Geneva "temporarily" and began to develop an emergency relief system. In 1976 this encouraged the UN to establish its Disaster Relief Office. At the time, only the military had an organized approach to disasters, but Gunn rectified this by training trainers in disaster preparedness. In those days, he kept busy in places like Chad, Algeria and Lebanon.

He then expanded the training program and developed WHO's Emergency Health Kit — a 1-tonne collection of 52 essential medicines and enough medical equipment to look after 10 000 people for 3 months. Gunn also set the standard for UN terminology through his *Multilingual Dictionary of Disaster Medicine and International Relief*, which now covers 7 languages.

Today, says Gunn, disasters and major emergencies have become "chronic" events. The end of the Cold War brought international calm but also a surge in internal struggles, while overpopulation and global warming are increasing the number and magnitude of man-made and natural disasters. "No corner of the world escapes," he says.

And if natural disasters aren't enough, Gunn is now wor-

ried about "man-conceived disasters" such as genocide, human disappearances and torture. For example, Rwanda's political situation led to war, which in turn led to genocide. And then drought hit. "These are very complex disasters and we tackle them very badly," he says. "The challenge for humanity is to improve our response."

Although he is discouraged by recent developments, he says there are rewards. "I know it sounds trite, but service is the main satisfaction. If you can bring the slightest help or hope, especially to underprivileged people, it's a source of satisfaction and it keeps you going."

Unquestionably, Gunn is a man who keeps going. Since leaving WHO in 1987 he has worked as an adviser to the International Red Cross, WHO, the UN, UNICEF and different governments. He is currently president of the International Association of Humanitarian Medicine Brock Chisholm, named in honour of WHO's first director-general, a Canadian who died in 1984. It comprises 70 scientists, including 3 Nobel Prize winners, and began as a high-level think-tank with a simple philosophy: health is a human right and a bridge to peace. It puts theory

into practice through a network of projects, specialists and hospitals in some 50 countries, named the World Open Hospital. They provide free, specialized treatment to the needy, such as abandoned young women in Pakistan whose faces have been destroyed by acid in marriage-related disputes.

Gunn, a past president of the World Association of Disaster and Emergency Medicine and member of Canada's Royal College, says he doesn't want to retire because he "wouldn't know what to do." He skis under the tutelage of a 4-year-old granddaughter and indulges his lifelong interest in the medicine and culture of Canada's First Nations by collecting rare books and maps. These document native practices, particularly on Canada's West coast, through the records of missionaries and explorers. Not surprisingly, his publications on that subject, including 3 books, have gained him international recognition. He was recently awarded an honorary doctorate in Italy, but of all the positions he has held, one of his most cherished is being an honorary chief of the Haida and Kwakiutl. His Kwakiutl name is *Kwe-Kwala-Gila* — Saviour of Lives. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*



Dr. William Gunn: courting disaster