

Most medical Y2K bugs squashed

Despite widespread fears of “a potentially huge problem,” only 19 Y2K-related medical equipment or system problems had been reported to CYNCH, the Canadian Year 2000 National Clearinghouse for Health, by Jan. 11. Doug Bateson, deputy director at the clearinghouse, said none of the problems posed “even a minor threat to patients.”

Since May 1998, CYNCH has received regular updates on Y2K compliance and problems from all provincial ministries of health, Health Canada’s Therapeutic Products Program and Public Works and Government Services Canada. It has also monitored the situation worldwide. By Jan. 11, only 29 health care-related Y2K problems had been reported in the US. All the Canadian failures involved either faulty dates on printouts or administrative systems that failed to start properly. “The fact that even some glitches occurred means our assumption of risk was correct,” says Bateson.

He credits the “quite amazing” low numbers with the level

of effort governments, institutions and especially suppliers put into fixing things. “There are hundreds of thousands of pieces of equipment in Canada. It’s hard to believe there wouldn’t have been something of greater significance.” CYNCH will continue to monitor problems and post results on its Web site, www.cynch.org; look under the Navigators toolbar.

Health Canada was also “pleasantly surprised” by the outcome. It expects to have a final tally of problems by the end of January (www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hpb-dgps/therapeut/htmleng/y2k_md.html). “There were some problems, but the manufacturers are on top of them now,” said spokesperson Denis Roy. He added that the Federal Bureau of Compliance and Enforcement is following up on these cases. Some problems were expected because “quite a few devices were listed as non-compliant,” said Roy. The Web site featured 72 pages of non-compliant or possibly noncompliant “high-risk devices with major issues.” — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*

Coroner accused of overkill

In the business of saving lives, is overkill possible? A municipal council in Yellowknife thinks so. Late last year it revised its procedural bylaw after the chief coroner in the Northwest Territories, Percy Kinney, hauled a body bag to the podium as he made a request for an underwater rescue team. “I do not believe the presentation was objectionable,” Kinney told *CMAJ*. “The presence of a body bag at the meeting may have been disturbing to some but it was meant to be. What better way to illustrate the seriousness of the message?”

Kinney’s August presentation occurred 14 months after a drowning that investigators concluded might have been averted by a rescue team. The local fire department expressed interest in providing this service, but city administrators and a committee recommended against it. Kinney’s appearance persuaded council to find the money. “Percy’s presentation was respectful, factual and effective,” said Councillor Bob Brooks. “All presentations should have such qualities. . . .

Using tools in a demonstration is always a better way to get your point across. It was a clean and empty bag. It would have been objectionable only if there was a body in it.”

“I did not find this objectionable,” agreed Councillor Kevin O’Reilly.

However, 4 other councillors (Robert Slaven, Cheryl Best, Blake Lyons, and Ben McDonald) were critical. “I was upset by the theatrics,” said Ben McDonald. “Good decisions are usually made for good reasons, not out of emotion or guilt.” To prevent council from being “pressured” in the future, McDonald decided to draft changes to Yellowknife’s procedural bylaw.

After researching the issue, he decided it would be impractical to prohibit much more than swearing, disrespectful speech and personal attacks on councillors or city staff. As a result, the revisions contain nothing that would stop Kinney from reappearing with his body bag.

In any case, some councillors indicated that their support for McDonald’s changes was unrelated to the



Coroner Percy Kinney: making a point with a body bag

coroner’s actions. Councillor Cheryl Best said she was more concerned about a July budget meeting at which ratepayers “resorted to swearing, name calling and questioning the motives and integrity of certain councillors.” — *Dave Helwig, London, Ont.*