

New triage system cuts prisoner visits to ERs, reduces threats against staff

A new Canadian triage system for prisoners with traumatic injuries has led to an almost four-fold decline in the number of prisoners being seen in the emergency departments at hospitals in Kingston, Ont., the *Canadian Journal of Emergency Medicine* (www.cma.ca/cjem/) reports in its July issue.

The system, introduced at the 9 prisons in and around Kingston, has also resulted in fewer threats and less violence against health professionals in emergency departments, as well as fewer escape attempts by prisoners.

The system employs a cadre of on-call community physicians to screen prisoner injuries via telephone. Verbal instructions are given to correctional officers or nurses. If necessary, the prisoner is seen on site by the physician or referred directly to the emergency department.

Prior to the system's introduction, all prisoners thought to have suffered traumatic injury in Kingston-area prisons were referred to 2 emergency departments in nearby hospitals. The new system has reduced the proportion of prisoners seen in these departments from an average of 6.1% of prisoners per year to 1.6%. The study also found that the "environment in the emergency department has improved and there has been a perceptible reduction in inmate-related incidents and threats against staff, patients and their families," said Dr. Michael O'Connor of Queen's University, one of the study authors. He said the system might prove useful at other hospitals serving prison populations. — *Barbara Sibbald, CMAJ*

McGill students combine poetry, prose in remembering "their cadavers"

It could have been any funeral: there was solemn organ music, a choir, candles on the altar, a sombre assembly in the pews. What made this service different, though, were the 45 people whose memory was being honoured. They had died over a year ago and had willed their bodies to science. To remember them, members of the first-year medical class from McGill and 2 of their professors created a commemorative service that combines students' poems and personal reflections with diary entries.

One by one, the young students took the podium to read each donor's name aloud and to talk frankly about the feelings provoked by their first-year anatomy class. Their reflections ran the gamut: fear and amazement, awe and gratitude. They also captured their thoughts about mortality and the doctor's role in the life cycle.

The first speaker, Karen Devon, recalled "literally touching someone's heart — imagining the sounds of its steady pulse," and her belated awareness of small scars, signs of the donor's individuality. Mélanie Mondou remarked on "the marvel of nature that never stops transforming itself."

Many of the students addressed their comments to the donors themselves, calling them friends or teachers. Others expressed empathy for the grief that must have affected the donor's family and friends during the previous year.

Their sincerity moved many of the donors' family members. Some, like the relatives of Ermina Sardani, who died Apr. 17, 2000, were initially sceptical about the notion of a family member willing her remains for educational purposes. "It goes against tradition," said Sardani's daughter-in-law, Gina



Susan Pinker

Closure at last: donor Ermina Sardani's husband and son

Rigolli, who recalled how her mother-in-law had requested help to find the forms she needed to sign. When no family members responded, the 73-year-old former midwife's assistant got the documents herself, signed them and asked family members to act as witnesses.

After hearing the students' heartfelt comments, Ermina Sardani's husband, sons and daughter-in-law decided that she had, in fact, done the right thing. Like many of the families present at the service, the Rigollis had requested that the body be returned at the end of the academic year in order to provide a traditional burial or cremation.

Dr. Sandra Miller, the anatomy professor who organized the service, says the event has become so popular that the McGill chapel may no longer be large enough to accommodate it. "People come here very doubtful . . . but a lot of them are really moved. The donations are increasing because of the popularity of this service." — *Susan Pinker, Montreal*