

U Sask dean vows to get his medical school off probation

Plans to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the College of Medicine in Saskatoon will go ahead as planned this year, even though the school could lose its right to produce new physicians within 24 months.

The college was placed on probation in December after deficiencies were identified by the 2 organizations that accredit medical schools in Canada and the US. It is the first Canadian school to face this type of reprimand.

The dean, Dr. William Albritton, says the college will fix its problems long before the deadline. "I don't see this in a negative light. This gives us guidance and direction and support for the kinds of things we want to do."

Albritton, who assumed his post in July 2002, said most of the deficiencies can be rectified through better planning and a modest increase in the college budget, but others are less optimistic.

"The fundamental reality is that this college is not funded for its educational mission, and that has to change," said

Dr. Roger Pierson, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology. "If all they do is the minimum, most of us are going to be working other places."

The probation was ordered by the Committee on Accreditation of Canadian Medical Schools and the American Medical Association's Liaison Committee on Medical Education. The list of problems cited includes an out-of-date library collection and a shortage of instructors. Albritton said the addition of 25 to 30 faculty members, plus a 10% budget increase over 5 years, will bring the college up to standard.

But Pierson, who helped author a pre-accreditation report for the college, said that's not enough. "The bottom line is that this whole area is under-resourced. I don't know why anyone would come to work here if they knew they would work twice as hard for half the money and have no free time to do the intellectual things that they need to do to make their academic life better. It's that bad."

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Pierson said many faculty have become "patient-seeing machines" in a clash of priorities between the medical school and the district health authority, which operates Royal University Hospital in Saskatoon. "There's no recognition that these people are academics. They need to be doing research, writing papers and thinking about how to make life better for the people of Saskatchewan."

Albritton hopes to overcome a lack of "collegial relations" at the school. "Those are the problems I wanted to solve when I came, and by solving those we will partly solve some other problems. We need to do an in-house clean-up first."

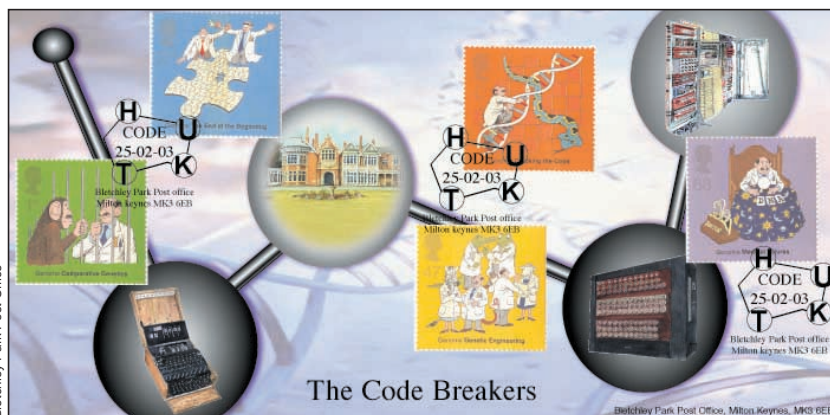
Students like Holly Zulyniak, president of the Student Medical Society, are anxious about the future, but she said a meeting with administrators has allayed some fears. "We're hoping it will lead to positive changes for us. The majority of students feel we are getting a good education, and we're hoping that the changes the accreditation team has recommended will enhance that."

She said first- and second-year students have been assured they will graduate.

To increase faculty numbers, Albritton hopes to encourage more practising MDs to assume teaching roles. But Dr. James Fritz, president of the Saskatchewan Medical Association, says most specialists won't have time. "A lot of people have expertise to contribute. Unfortunately, we have one of the highest patient-to-physician ratios. If they intend to increase the workload [by giving] physicians more teaching responsibilities, I don't know how we're going to continue to deliver the volume of patient care that we do."

Saskatchewan's minister of learning, Jim Melenchuk, said the province is "looking at committing funds" to get the medical school off probation within a year. — *Amy Jo Ehman*, Saskatoon

Bletchley Park marks 50th anniversary of DNA's decoding



Britain is marking the 50th anniversary of Watson and Crick's cracking of the DNA code in February with a series of special stamps, but the country's "secret little post office" at Bletchley Park is taking things a step further (www.bletchleycovers.com). Its first-day cover for 5 "Secret of Life" stamps issued Feb. 25 links the decoding of the human genome with the brilliant wartime mathematicians at Bletchley Park who broke Nazi Germany's Enigma code. "It was the work at Bletchley Park that led to the development of the modern computer. This in turn has aided important advances in medical science, not least the decoding of the secret of life." The stamps themselves show the different stages in the deciphering of the human genome. — *CMAJ*