

# Saskatoon: The Birthplace of Medicare



A walking tour

of downtown Saskatoon



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## A walking tour of downtown Saskatoon

DID YOU KNOW that Saskatoon played a pivotal and historic role in the development of Medicare in Canada in the early 1960s? As you take this historic self-guided walk through Saskatoon's downtown you can almost hear the fiery debates that took place during the Doctor's Strike of 1962, and the voices of hope that established Community Clinics in our province.

The election of 1960 gave the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) government of Saskatchewan a mandate to introduce the Medical Care Insurance Plan, a plan that would provide health services to Saskatchewan families regardless of ability to pay. It was the first of its kind in Canada and created a great divide between doctors and the government. Citizens were divided as well, some supporting the doctors and others supporting the concept of Medicare. On July 1, 1962 the Medical Insurance Plan came into law and on that day Saskatchewan doctors closed their offices and refused to see patients, providing services only through emergency departments.

At the same time a group of citizens, with the support of a few doctors, believed so strongly in the concept of Medicare that they set up their own co-operative health clinic and began seeing patients on July 3, 1962. How brave they were! How passionate they were in their ideals, to start a Clinic on their own with so few resources and so little support in the medical community. They could not have foreseen that this courageous effort would still be alive today in the Saskatoon Community Clinic, a health care co-operative that provides primary health care services to about 25,000 Saskatoon residents.

As you take this walk back through time, you will come to understand the history of how the government and doctors reached an agreement and found a way beyond the impasse. The signing of the Saskatoon Agreement (1962) marked the arrival of the Medical Care Insurance Plan in Saskatchewan, and paved the way for our national system of Medicare.

Tommy Douglas,  
former CCF/NDP leader  
and one of Medicare's founders.





## ❶ Oddfellows Temple Building

**416 21st St. E.**

This was the site where citizens, concerned about the looming medical crisis, met in the early 1960s to begin discussing alternatives to the fee for service system. They, along with 25 other communities, planned to create Clinics that would provide services if the doctors withdrew their services.

This building has a rich and varied history. Constructed in 1912 as the Oddfellows Temple, its first floor served as the Public Library from 1913-23. In 1962 it contained the Union Centre.



Commemorative marker erected in 1995.

## 2 Former residence of Dr. Samuel Wolfe

### 814 Saskatchewan Cres. E.

Across the river from the Bessborough Hotel, this was the home of Dr. Samuel Wolfe, one of the first Medical Insurance Commissioners. (1) Dr. Wolfe was an Associate Professor of Medicine at the University Hospital. When the doctors withdrew their services he took leave and worked in the Saskatoon Community Clinic. When the strike was over he resigned from the University under protest, and became the first Medical Director of the Community Clinic. He subsequently had a stellar career in the United States and retired as Professor Emeritus in the Department of Health Administration at Columbia University.

Dr. Wolfe went to Britain in June 1962 and arranged the airlift of 100 physicians to come to replace the Saskatchewan doctors who had gone on strike. Teams of specialists were on stand-by in New York, Los Angeles and Detroit, had they been required.



Dr. Samuel Wolfe



### **3 Parktown Hotel**

**924 Spadina Cres. E.**

This is where the doctor's negotiating committee stayed during the emotionally charged days of the strike. The motel was much smaller in 1962. It stands beside the site of the previous office of the College of Physicians and Surgeons.

While the medical profession (generally) supported the concept of a medical insurance plan, items in the Government plan were deemed unacceptable. Doctors feared losing professional autonomy and objected to a clause in the Act that suggested that physicians would be subject to government regulations. Even more importantly, they wished to retain the health insurance plans the profession had established; Medical Services Incorporated of Saskatoon and General Medical Services of Regina. Under those plans the profession not only set their fees but also determined how much the insurance plans would reimburse doctors. The Government rejected this proposal because they believed these changes would result in the degeneration of a public plan into a multiple payer system, much like that which exists in the United States.

Dr. Dalgleish and Lord Taylor





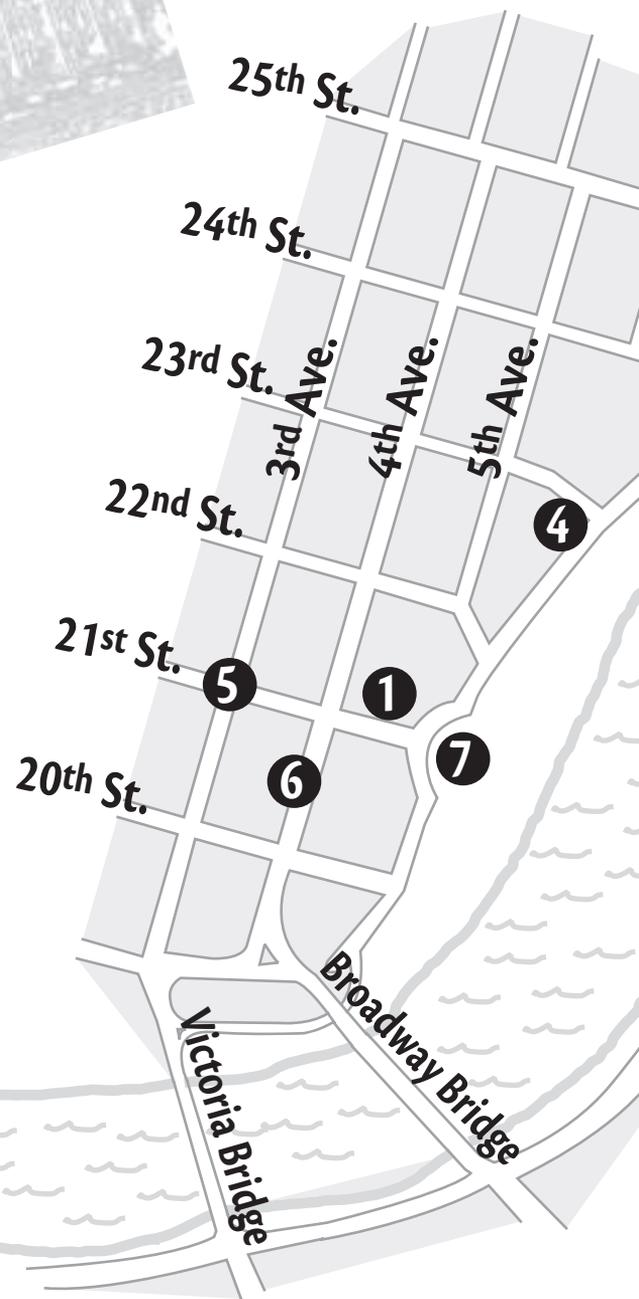
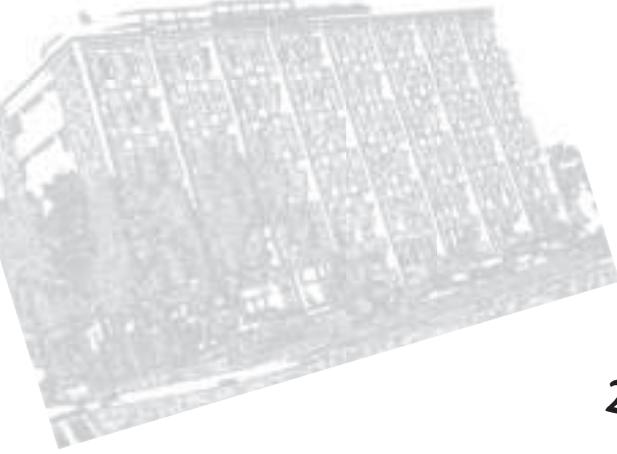
## 4 Medical Arts Building

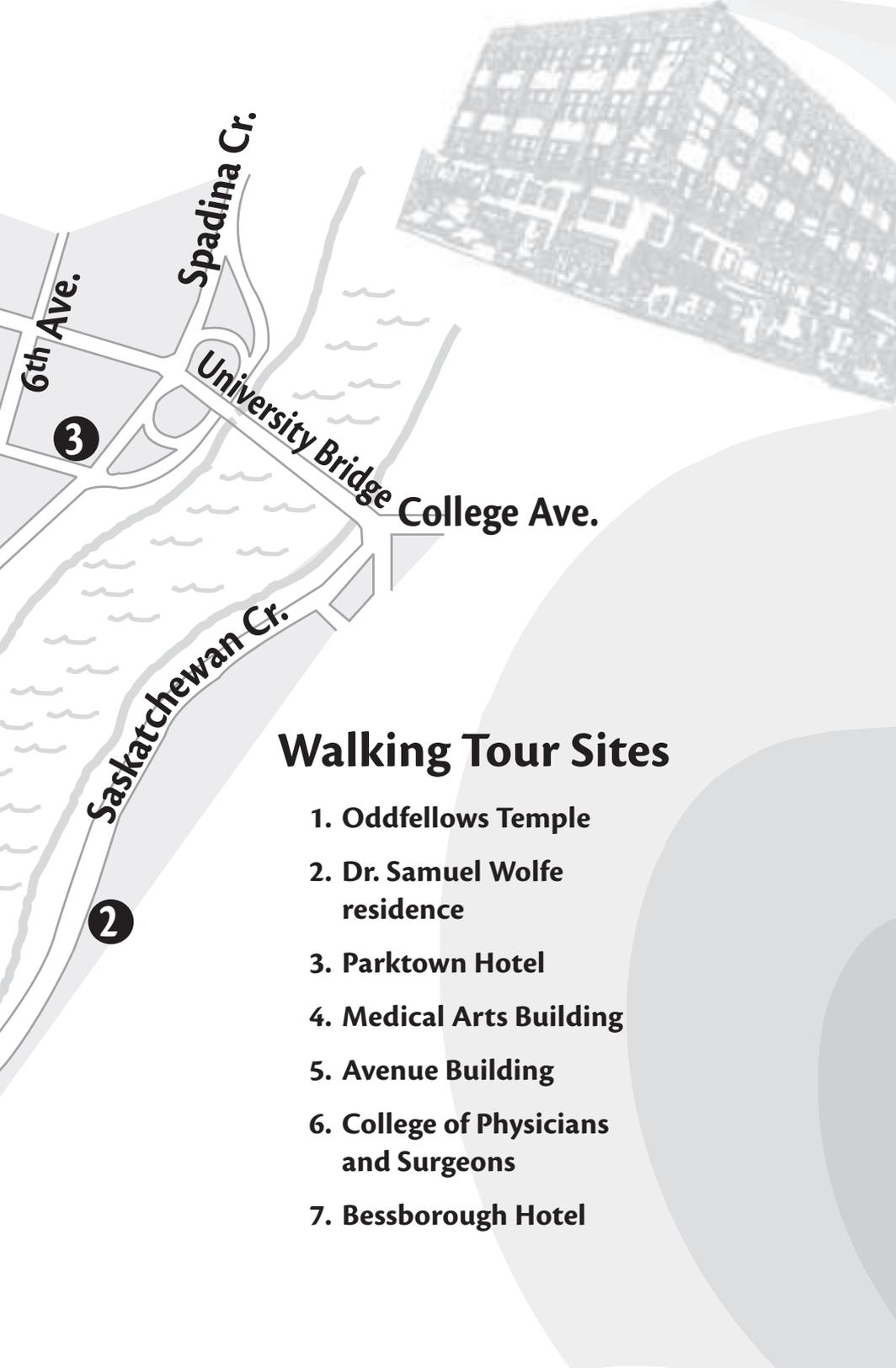
750 Spadina Cres. E.

Constructed in 1962, this building housed the majority of the physician offices in Saskatoon. In the third week of the strike, Mr. Woodrow Lloyd, the Premier, enlisted the help of Stephen Lord Taylor from Britain. Lord Taylor was an English physician who had been made a Life-Peer by the British Labour Government for his help in establishing the National Health Service.

The Solarium served as the meeting place for the doctor's negotiating committee, led by the President of the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Dr Harold Dagleish, and Lord Taylor. Much to the surprise of both sides, Lord Taylor immediately assumed the role of negotiator and messenger. He believed that the level of acrimony and disagreement was such that no agreement would be forthcoming if the two sides met directly. (2)







6th Ave.

Spadina Cr.

University Bridge

College Ave.

Saskatchewan Cr.

3

2

## Walking Tour Sites

1. Oddfellows Temple
2. Dr. Samuel Wolfe residence
3. Parktown Hotel
4. Medical Arts Building
5. Avenue Building
6. College of Physicians and Surgeons
7. Bessborough Hotel



## **5 Avenue Building: first home of Saskatoon Community Clinic**

**220 3rd Ave. S .**

Constructed in 1912 by F.R. Macmillan, this was the first department store in Saskatoon. It became home to Eaton's in 1927 before the department store moved across the street into the building that now houses the Saskatoon Public School Board.

While the political tumult raged, mass meetings organized by the “Keep Our Doctors Committee”(KOD), which opposed the government’s medical insurance plan, were held in the lead up to the July strike, while the members of the newly formed Saskatoon Community Health Services Association continued to plan for a clinic.

The Saskatoon Community Clinic opened for business in this building on July 3,1962. A bare office housed two black telephones, two doctors—Drs. Joan Whitney-Moore and Margaret Mahood—armed only with their medical bags, registered nurse Grace Deverell and a



Left to right: Helen Vey, receptionist, Sonja Freiermuth, nurse (standing), Peggy Altwasser, Dept. Head of Reception, Anne Dewar, Medical Records staff, and an unidentified patient at the first Saskatoon Community Clinic



Dr. Margaret Mahood and Dr. Joan Witney-Moore, the two founding physicians of the Saskatoon Community Clinic

small group of patients and members. The members went scavenging for furniture. They improvised, using folding tables from the Union Centre across the road topped with mattresses to make examining tables. Demand was great for services and the clinic was open until midnight in its first days (3). Later, members took out loans and second-mortgaged their homes to raise the money for equipment.



## ⑥ College of Physicians and Surgeons

**211 4th Ave. S.**

Prior to 1970 this was the location of the Saskatoon Public School Board. It is now home to the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Saskatchewan and the Saskatchewan Medical Association. They are completely separate organizations. The College licenses, maintains the quality of and disciplines physicians, while the Association acts as a professional association negotiating the fee schedule with the Medical Care Commission and provides post-graduate education for physicians.

This separation was not as clear in 1962 when the organizations were inseparable. Supporters of the medical plan thought it grossly improper for the College of Physicians to call upon all doctors licensed in the province to pay a levy (which the law allowed to be collected for the work of the College). This money was used to conduct a political campaign during the 1960 election.



## **7 Bessborough Hotel**

**601 Spadina Cres. E.**

This great Saskatoon landmark was built as a relief project during the depression, completed in 1932, and opened for guests in 1935. This is also where the Saskatoon Agreement was signed in July 1962.

By chance, it was also the location of the CCF party's annual convention in the third week of July 1962. Just down the street from the Bessborough was the meeting of the "Sub-Committee on Saskatchewan" of the Executive of the Canadian Medical Association. As a result, all parties, the Premier and Cabinet, and the doctors were in town as Lord Taylor started his negotiations.

When Lord Taylor arrived he parked his car outside the front door and slipped a note written on House of Lords notepaper under the windscreen-wiper that read, "Do not Move, Signed, Taylor" which is the style used by a Peer of the realm. He rarely used the car but for three days "the histrionic, colourful, hyperactive, tall and shaggy-browed man striding back and forth between the two sides, alternately cursing and extolling, pleading and demanding, speaking softly and pounding tables..." (4) walked the two short blocks between the Bessborough and the Medical

Arts Building leading the discussion that was to result in the signing of the Saskatoon Agreement. The Agreement was signed by Premier Woodrow Lloyd in his suite in the Bessborough on July 23, 1962.

An accord was reached when the government gave way and allowed physicians to bill the non-profit insurance plans, which in turn would bill the Provincial Plan for payment of doctor's services. Doctors could also practice entirely outside the Plan and bill their patients directly. Patients would, in turn, obtain reimbursement from the Plan. These payments would be based on the schedule of fees of the Saskatchewan Medical Association. In addition, the profession was strongly reassured that the Government had no intention of interfering with the way doctors practice medicine. The profession agreed to work under the plan with those concessions.

After three weeks the strike was settled and doctors returned to work. Peace did not return immediately. Some families remained split and it took many years for differences to be resolved. Differences also remained within the medical profession. Community Clinic doctors, having opted to provide services during the strike, experienced the repercussions of having gone against the medical community.

Many of the Community Health Associations folded as they were unable to obtain physicians, and if they did, local medical associations often prevented them from working in hospitals. However, five did survive in Saskatoon, Prince Albert, Regina, Wynyard and Lloydminster.

Saskatchewan paid a heavy price to obtain Medicare and Canada owes it a great debt for its efforts. All Canadians should remember its sacrifice whenever it is suggested that the country adopts other methods of obtaining medical services.

Woodrow Lloyd, Premier of Saskatchewan in 1962.



## REFERENCES

1. Dr. Samuel Wolfe was the first medical director of the Saskatoon Community Clinic and author of "Doctors' Strike—Medical Care and Conflict in Saskatchewan" (1967).
2. *Lord Stephen Taylor's Reminiscences*, quoted in *Health Insurance and Canadian Public policy*, Taylor, M. McGill Queen's Press, 1978
3. *The First Ten Years*, Gruending, D., Saskatoon Community Health Association.
4. *Doctors Strike*, p.71

This pamphlet was produced in commemoration of Saskatoon's 100th birthday in 2006 by the Saskatoon Community Health Services Association Ltd (CHSA).

A big thank you goes to the authors of this pamphlet, Dr. John Bury, retired Community Clinic physician and Betsy Bury, retired Member Relations Officer.

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CHSA is a primary health care co-operative founded in 1962 by pro-Medicare supporters. It provides health care services to more than 25,000 residents of Saskatoon and area through the Saskatoon Community Clinic and Community Clinic-Westside.



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