MDs who love this planet will fight for disarmament: Caldicott

Lynne Cohen

The special role doctors play in society means they have a special responsibility to try and prevent nuclear war, pediatrician-turned-antiwar-activist Dr. Helen Caldicott told 400 physicians, scientists, lawyers and nurses during a mid-April fundraising dinner in Ottawa.

"We're the most privileged section of society", she said. "Our profession is sacred. Patients see us as God. To them, sometimes we are omnipotent."

And what does that have to do with nuclear war? "The whole world is threatened by a war that could occur at any moment", she continued. "So to practise medicine in isolated consulting rooms and hospitals, without looking at the future and realizing the public health of the world is threatened, is to practise psychic numbing. We need to see that we have larger obligations than individual patient care."

Caldicott was speaking at the annual dinner sponsored by the Ottawa chapter of Canadian Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (CPPNW). This year the dinner was cosponsored by three other groups - Science for Peace, Lawyers for Social Responsibility and Nurses for Social Responsibility. Those attending the $50-a-plate dinner heard Cal-
Caldicott make several controversial statements. For instance, she said Canadian doctors have to teach the country’s uranium miners about the effects the substance has on their testicles. “I found the best way to get and hold the attention of Australian uranium miners was to tell them the effects of gamma radiation on their gonads”, she said. “Uranium miners tend to be pretty macho. But my method worked. The entire Australian trade-union movement turned the country into a quadriplegic. The government wanted to mine and sell uranium, but the country wouldn’t do what its head was telling it.”

Before her address, Caldicott said in an interview that she wishes she could step out of the spotlight and turn her attention to the care of sick patients. “It would be more challenging, more stimulating and more satisfying. But I couldn’t do it because I’ve lost my innocence. I can’t practise the denial it would take to turn inwards and ignore the dangers of nuclear war.”

The Australian pediatrician, who was in the midst of a 14-city Canadian lecture tour, confessed that even though lecturing and giving interviews can become a boring grind, both steps are absolutely necessary if the disarmament message is to be spread. Caldicott, who has been involved with the peace movement since 1971, is trying to convince Canadians to declare the country a nuclear-free zone. “It took 200 speeches in 2 weeks to do it in New Zealand in 1983”, she said.

At the Ottawa fund-raiser, the only nonpublic address of her Canadian tour, Caldicott praised the members of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, of which CPPNW is a member organization. “Because of us, the INF [intermediate nuclear forces] Treaty is a reality, and between the US and USSR there will be a 50% cut in strategic arms this year. Because of us, 80% of Americans support a nuclear freeze and have for 6 years. We’ve had these successes because we’ve been able to translate the Pentagon’s language into lay language. We’ve taught that nuclear war would be bad for your health.”

The threat of war is the reason, she explained, why Canadian doctors must teach uranium miners about the danger it poses to their health and that of the whole world — she said Canada sells more than one-third of all uranium used to make nuclear bombs and to fuel nuclear reactors.

Caldicott, whose concern about nuclear war was sparked at age 14 when she read “On the Beach” by Nevil Shute — it tells of Australians waiting for radioactive clouds to reach their country after life in all other countries had been destroyed — reserved her greatest praise for Soviet General Secretary Mikhail Gor-bachev. “I think he’s for real”, she said, and then listed 12 of his initiatives, including the proposal, rejected by US President Ronald Reagan, of aiming for complete global nuclear disarmament by the year 2000.

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“I think if he loses office, I will quit”, she said of Gorbachev. “He’s a miracle, and the only hope I have of dying with the knowledge that the world will continue.”

Although she gushed about Gorbachev, Caldicott insisted that she advocates bilateral disarmament that is mutually verifiable. “It makes me really angry when I hear that people, doctors especially, believe that we want unilateral disarmament”, she told CMAJ. “That just isn’t so.”

Asked about the importance of the INF Treaty, Caldicott likened it to giving an Aspirin to a cancer patient. “It is important symbolically, yes, but it is a placebo and the patient is still terminal. There is a lot of work that has to be done.”

During her address Caldicott returned several times to the cost of the arms race and the fact that it robs nations, particularly those in the Third World, of the ability to provide health care and food for their citizens. However, it was probably representatives from Nurses for Social Responsibility who put that argument best. They told the audience that money spent on arms should be used to save lives, such as those of the 40 000 infants who die each day because of malnutrition and easily preventable diseases. “It is the relief of human suffering, not more and bigger weapons, that will bring lasting peace.”