

A Historical Overview of Health Care in North Renfrew & Area: Looking Back from 2025

*Compiled and presented by David Cox,
Chair of the Board of Deep River & District Health,
at the 50th Anniversary Celebration of the “New” Hospital
hosted at the Deep River Public Library in October 2025*

Health care services and hospital facilities in the North Renfrew region have evolved in response to changes in health care delivery models, population distributions and demographics.

An exciting renewal of the Deep River and District Health campus is currently underway, with construction of a new 96-bed Long Term Care facility progressing well and set to open in 2027, while we recently celebrated the opening of a new modern Family Health Team primary care facility on the campus. These new facilities will enable more integration of care across all health sectors, and bring balance to the needs of an aging population while enhancing provision of local primary care services. Another exciting development is a recent announcement from the Ministry of Health that grants funding to establish and operate hospice beds at DRDH, which is an ideal repurposing of 4SL space that will transition to the new LTC.

These current enhancements to our local health care facilities are the latest evolution of our health care infrastructure, and truly significant step changes in the health care landscape for Deep River and the surrounding area, since its development journey began in the early 1940s.

In addition for being DRDH Board Chair, I am a Director in the Society for Preservation of Canada’s Nuclear History. This has enabled me to access records that look back into the 1940s and beyond, to prepare an Historical Summary prior to 50 years ago, when DRDH was established in 1975.

Medical services were first provided in the Deep River area about eighty years ago, when Defense Industries Limited under the Atomic Energy Project established the Plant Hospital on the Chalk River site. This was primarily an outpatient facility equipped to handle the initial treatment of illness or accidents affecting workers at the site, for which construction work was a major activity in those early days. There were seven beds, and the only other emergency care was available in Pembroke. Many of the workers lived onsite in a large temporary barracks. The Plant Hospital was also staffed and equipped to perform specialized health control procedures

associated with the effects of radiation on workers, and standardization of the techniques for measurement of uranium and plutonium in urine samples.

However, medical services were very limited in the village of Deep River and the surrounding area, as no hospital was available for the growing number of workers and their families prior to early 1945. Patients needing hospitalization were sent to doctors in Pembroke, who were mostly general practitioners. At this time, the townsite consisted of a temporary bank, post office, grocery store, a few completed houses and about one third of the Staff Hotel.

The first medical director, Wilford E. Park arrived in 1945 and was tasked by Defense Industries Limited to establish and staff the local medical facilities. The first doctor's office was created in a newly finished Wartime-4 house at #2 Glendale Avenue, with an office and an examining room. [photo insert] The Glendale office boasted one of three telephones in the town, and the first grass lawn, which was very special in the otherwise dry sand landscape. Many of the early patients were German merchant seamen POW performing construction labour in Deep River as the townsite was being built. In relation to the Glendale office, the biography for W.E. Park noted that "... all the medical supplies and gallon jugs of medicines were sitting on the floor around about. When I wanted to dispense any liquid medicine the only available bottles to put it in were empty and discarded whisky bottles."

[insert photo "Original Deep River Medical Office No. 2 Glendale Avenue" fall 1945, photo credit AECL]



"No. 2 Glendale was used as the medical clinic until May 1946, when the [first] hospital was opened. Photo taken in the Fall of 1945 -- shows the only two grass lawns in the village."

In December 1945, two cases of diphtheria were detected and a Wartime-6 house on Alder Crescent was requisitioned as a temporary hospital. Two of the first nurses in town were assigned to the isolation unit and were tasked with preparing meals and keeping the coal fire burning, on top of normal nursing duties.

The “Deep River Village Hospital” officially opened on May 16, 1946, much to the delight of the local residents. The building was in the shape of a “T” with the main section fronting on Montcalm Street. It housed the doctor’s offices, business office, nursery and wards. The middle wing housed an operating room, delivery room and labour room. The main building also included the laboratory, x-ray room, and a dentist office. This was the only dental facility in town for several years, and dental visits comprised about one third of the visits to the hospital at that time.

The Village Hospital was able to accommodate seven infants and 14 adults, but had no kitchen. Mid-day and evening meals were prepared at the Staff Hotel by Crawley McCracken employees and delivered to the hospital. The town had no drug store for several years, so the hospital dispensary was an especially busy service for the general public.

[Insert photo Village Hospital on Montcalm Street, circa 1946, AECL photo credit]



In a 1948 NRC Report, W.R. Skelly, Branch Head – Village Hospital Branch, reported: “The past year saw a great increase in the number of patients treated at the Deep River Village Hospital (DRVH) which increase was largely due to attendances given to a larger number of patients residing outside of Deep River. The DRVH can accommodate twelve adults, six newborn infants, and about four small children although some crowding is necessary to do so. The hospital, including outpatient and inpatient departments, is staffed by three full-time physicians, two part-time physicians, two dentists, two dental nurses, sixteen medical nurses, one receptionist, two office clerks, two janitor orderlies and two kitchen maids. During the year there were 14,614 attendees. Of this number 3,821 were patients residing outside of Deep River. There were 97 births and 273 operations. The high birth rate for the village is explained by the high proportion of young people living here. Dental service is given from 8 a.m. until 10 p.m. daily, except on Saturday afternoons and Sundays. The Medical Fee Schedule was revised on July 15 resulting in increased rates in some cases.”

Laundry at the hospital was sent out until 1953 when an addition was completed to the facility. However, baby diapers were an exception. From the beginning, all diapers were carefully washed and hung out on a line to dry behind the hospital. About 1800 babies were delivered at the VH during its first ten years of operation. The high birth rate continued for many years, as a result of the relatively young population.

There were no taxis in the town initially, few cars and few telephones. Consequently, the hospital staff used a staff car to pick up patients and bring them to the hospital. When an urgent request came, anyone on staff who could start, stop and steer a car through sand was sent out to pick up the patient. There are many stories of stuck cars and even drivers unable to stop the car due to lack of driving experience, leading to patients finding alternate means of reaching the hospital. Fortunately, the guards at the outer gate had a telephone and car, and were able to perform patient delivery to the hospital when requested.

A north wing was added to the VH in 1951-52, which included more nursery space, laundry and a modern kitchen facility. Importantly, air conditioning was added to this wing, something that was a desperately missing in earlier years.

The hospital operated initially under Defence Research Industries Limited, then in 1947 it was governed by the National Research Council, until 1952 when Atomic Energy of Canada assumed responsibility. The DRVH received its first accreditation for quality of services in January 1955. This was the first time a private hospital had achieved this distinction.

In December 1973, the Deep River Hospital became a publicly-funded hospital, with oversight transferred to the Ontario Ministry of Health. This began the journey to replace the Village Hospital, after about 40 years of operation. Design and construction of a new hospital progressed through 1974, to be located at the corner of Banting Drive and Balmer’s Bay Road.

[Insert photo of Aug 1974 initial site preparation and early construction work]



Aug 28 1974

[Insert photo of 16 Oct 1974 official ground breaking]



October 16, 1974.

The new hospital official opening has held on October 25 1975.

Today the Deep River and District Hospital (DRDH), serves the Upper Ottawa Valley. In November 2019, the organization received Accreditation with Exemplary Standing from Accreditation Canada, the highest ranking conferred, and this was repeated in 2024. The current organization includes the DRDH, the North Renfrew Family Health Team, and the Four Seasons Lodge Long Term Care. The Deep River Foodbank and North Renfrew Family Services occupy space at the health campus.

[Insert photo of aerial view DRDH]



The DRDH facility has been upgraded progressively over its 50 year life, to meet evolving needs in the community.

The new expansion projects for Long Term Care and the Family Health Team, and hospice in the future, will take the organization into the future as a core member of the health services for Deep River and the surrounding area.

[Insert photo of aerial view DRDH with land cleared for LTC expansion 2023 May 11]



I want to acknowledge some of the Resources used to prepare the historical summary

- The National Research Council Review, 1948
- From an Ontario Farm, Volume One of the Autobiobgraphy of Wilford E. Park, M.D. prepared in 1985
- Deep River Digest, Volume 25 Issue 10, Sept 4 1953
- Deep River Digest Shopper, exact date unknown, 1955.
- North Renfrew Times article, “The new hospital: An aura of spaciousness”, October 29 1975, page 3
- North Renfrew Times article, “Early Hospital Services at CRNL and in Deep River”, contributed by Jim Ungrin with resources of the Society for Preservation of Canada’s Nuclear Heritage Inc. <https://nuclearheritage.ca>