

Sacred Ground

Issue:

Protection and maintenance of the sanctity of cemeteries / graves at former and existing psychiatric institutions.

Background

Until the 1960's, many long-term and permanent residents / patients of psychiatric institutions who died in these institutions, were buried in cemeteries on the institution grounds or in close proximity to the institution. Graves were usually only marked with numbered concrete markers – no names, no dates, no personal remarks or acknowledgement. With the closing and/or downsizing of psychiatric institutions (de-institutionalization), many of these cemeteries have been forgotten, or fallen into disrepair. The protection of the cemeteries is an issue that has been addressed or ignored to varying degrees throughout the country.

The cemeteries of Selkirk Mental Health Centre (SMHC) and the former Brandon Mental Health Centre (BMHC) in Manitoba offer an example of the issue.

Both Centres were provincial institutions. The Centres' buildings and land are owned by the Government of Manitoba.

The SMHC cemetery occupies the back 20 – 30% of a local church cemetery located on an isolated, bush surrounded property on the outskirts of Selkirk. The BMHC cemetery is on the old BMHC grounds. Efforts were made to enhance the grave markers (Concrete blocks with only a file/case number engraved in the concrete) on both cemeteries by screwing small black plastic tags to the markers with the deceased persons last name on it. In both cemeteries a monument was erected to pay recognition to these individuals who had lived and died in these institutions.

Efforts to maintain the cemetery continue in Selkirk; largely as a result of the personal commitment and work of the spiritual care staff at SMHC.

Brandon presents a different picture. The plastic tags on the markers are faded and warped from sun and weather. The memorial cairn is deteriorating, the metal plaque mounted on the cairn is rusting, painted names and words are peeling off. The grounds are untended except for keeping the grass cut.

BMHC was closed approx 6 years ago. The Province of Manitoba still owns the buildings and grounds. Various groups & organizations have been maneuvering to acquire the property. At this point, no information is available on whether or not the province will protect and maintain the cemetery.

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The regulation and licensing of cemeteries in Canada falls under provincial legislation. As long as this issue stays under the political radar, the Province of Manitoba can very quietly choose to divest itself of this property and deregulate/ decommission the cemetery at BMHC

A few individuals, including a former patient and a community psychiatrist have attempted for several years, to lobby for the protection of these grounds. To this point their efforts have fallen on deaf ears. They have been unable to ascertain where and to whom to direct their questions and efforts. They are currently attempting to mobilize other interested individuals in the Brandon Region to join their efforts to restore and protect this cemetery.

Information about what is happening in other Canadian jurisdictions seems next to impossible to gather. Literature searches, newspaper searches, and internet searches produced next to no results.

Cemetery restoration projects in places such as Georgia have proven to be a catalyst for consumer organization and development. These projects have provided opportunity for people to exercise their advocacy skills, work together, and successfully raise public awareness of the historical plight of persons often abandoned to live and perish alone, ignored, and forgotten.

Acting on this model, a national project of restoring, maintaining and protecting the sanctity and dignity of the graves of Canadians who died in our institutions, may be a vital catalyst for the growth of the consumer/survivor voice and movement in our country.

To that end I recommend the following:

Recommendations:

1. A National Inventory of cemeteries/burial grounds at former and existing Psychiatric Institutions must be established, to facilitate the monitoring and protection of these burial grounds. The CCAMHR, through its members and stakeholders, will drive the establishment of this National Inventory.
2. All Provincial and Territorial governments must exercise their regulatory powers to protect the sanctity of cemeteries / graves at former and existing Psychiatric Institutions within their jurisdiction.
3. CCAMHR, through its members and stakeholders, will promote and support the restoration (where necessary), maintenance, and protection of the sanctity of the cemeteries / graves at former and existing Psychiatric Institutions.

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