

Unit 7: Megan Davies: Introduction / Discuss the history of institutionalization of the elderly in Canada. What institutions existed then and what was their purpose?

A: My name is Megan Davies and I teach at York University. I'm a historian of health, and I don't teach in the history department. I teach in a program called Health in Society. And I teach about health generally, and I teach about the patient. I teach about health and place. And really, my research interests reflect my teaching path there. I'm interested in the healthcare system, primarily from a user perspective and I define health quite broadly in terms of my research. So I'm interested in health as sort of an everyday thing, not necessarily something that you'd go to the hospital about. And I'm interested in mental health and I'm interested in old age. I do research on old age, and I do research on B.C.

Q: **Discuss the history of institutionalization of the elderly in Canada.**

A: Early institutions for the elderly were primarily poor law institutions, early state institutions for the elderly. And in central and eastern Canada, those began a lot earlier. I'm a B.C. specialist so the institutions I'm looking at were established in the late 19th century. And poor law institutions were, by nature, fairly punitive because they were meant to be a last resort for people who had no other place to turn for a livelihood. But in British Columbia, the story unfolded in a rather different way, which I find quite interesting, because the homes for the elderly that were established in the late 19th century were primarily established for men because there were too many old men in the province. There were demographically a preponderance of elderly men amongst the white population, the non-native population of the province and as they aged, they were very vulnerable because they were men who had never married. So, the government viewed these men as worthy recipients of state assistance and instead of casting them off, created fairly decent institutions for them to live in, places where they would go when they were no longer able to care for themselves in society, but they were actually in relatively good shape. So, while they were living in these places, they would run gardens and do the work of these institutions. These places were established in different parts of B.C. fairly early on and were run, like I said, as I think in an institutional sense, fairly helpful institutions. And there was also a home for aged and infirm ladies in Victoria, B.C., that is still running. It's called Rose Manor. And it was a nondenominational home that was

established by the worthy women of Victoria in the late 19th century. There was also a home for elderly Chinese men, who, again, would be single and vulnerable in old age because they didn't have a family to support them and were not welcome at the old men's home because of the rampant racism in the province and the society in that time period.