



Founder of Heart Niagara remembered as visionary

By [Ray Spiteri](#) Review Reporter
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Dr. Stafford Dobbin, founder and medical director of Heart Niagara and an early adopter of health promotion and making a significant difference with heart disease, died Tuesday.

In 1977, Dobbin, a Niagara Falls physician, realized the region was in dire need of heart-

healthy services focusing on education to prevent heart disease.

Although chronic diseases such as heart disease are among the most common and costly health problems, Dobbin maintained they are also among the most preventable. The key, he always said, is early intervention.

So, 43 years ago, Dobbin created Heart Niagara, which focused on cardiac rehabilitation and prevention.

He approached his friend and running partner Wayne Thomson, to be chairman of the board of the new charity.

That original vision for a healthier Niagara continues today through education and experiential learning.

Over the years, the non-profit agency has been providing cardiac-care programs through schools and community events, offering defibrillator and CPR training and smoke cessation services.

Karen Stearne, the agency's executive director, said Stafford was the architect of programming that has benefited all of Niagara.

"I think that 45 years ago, it was a time when heart health and cardiovascular-disease management and health promotion was not at the forefront of anybody's mind," she said. "Prevention was not where people were at, they were responding to illness."

She said Dobbin envisioned a community that was healthy due to education and programming, with positive lifestyle choices.

"In 1977, his vision, at that point, was to build this community-based coronary-care program and I think he has realized all of those things."

Stearne said in the late 1970s, he realized people who had faced a heart attack or any kind of cardiovascular disease did not have a place to go, so he pioneered rehabilitation after heart attack, establishing the Heart Niagara cardiac rehabilitation program, which ran for 26 years.

“In that time, we saw over 8,500 patients and in our last year of operation, we had over 500 patients in the program, with an 82 per cent retention rate.”

She said Dobbin also recognized that to “eradicate this disease,” it was important to work with children.

“He believed that children are the only population that are 100 per cent available to change their pattern by better understanding the risk factors of heart disease.”

Heart Niagara launched its Healthy Heart Schools’ Program in 1987. The program works with elementary and secondary schools across the region to deliver disease prevention education and programs to students.

Stearne said Dobbin was also instrumental in the establishment of Niagara Emergency Medical Services.

“He worked all the way through his career on preparing our community in case of an emergency,” she said, adding Heart Niagara plans to recognize Dobbin’s legacy.

Thomson said he was best friends with Dobbin for 25-30 years.

“He has done so much for people in this region with Heart Niagara and never gave up — he was always giving his time for people,” he said.

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“The other thing I always admired him for was his ability to communicate and give a speech. Every time he spoke, it was so impressive. I always thought he would have been a great political person because of his ability to communicate so well with others.”

A churchyard service will take place in his native Northern Ireland at a future date, and his ashes will be placed with those of his parents in Hillsborough.

Those interested in making a donation in Dobbin’s memory are asked to consider Heart Niagara’s Healthy Heart Schools’ Program.

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