

# The Hollenberg Clinic: An important contribution to Canadian integrative healthcare

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## Abstract

The Hollenberg Clinic was an important and significant contributor to healthcare models during the 1950s in Canada. Based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, the Clinic was a family-run enterprise, and was in operation from approximately 1949-1958. Based on in-depth interviews with family members and expert sources, as well as analysis of archival documents, a detailed historical description of the Clinic is made. It describes aspects such as Clinic personnel and training, layout and services, and areas of specialty expertise. The involvement of the Clinic physicians in the former University of Manitoba Faculty of Medicine, and research activities as clinician researchers, are highlighted. The argument is made that the Clinic closely modeled the integrative care model of the Mayo Clinic, and was the first in Winnipeg to link integrated care services with clinical investigative medicine.

*Keywords: Hollenberg Medical Family; integrative care models; Canadian medical history*

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## Introduction

The Hollenberg Clinic was an important and significant contribution to healthcare models during the 1950s in Canada. Based in Winnipeg, Manitoba, the Clinic was a family-run enterprise, and was in operation from approximately 1949-1958. As the grandson of two of the founding members (Drs. Jake and Esther Hollenberg) and having recently moved to Winnipeg, I became fascinated with the Clinic's story. It is one that has yet to be told in-depth. To fully understand the Clinic's impact and significance, I conducted in-depth interviews with family members and expert sources who could recall details about the Clinic. I also delved into the medical archives held at the University of Manitoba.

## Setting the stage: 1950s healthcare in Canada

The Hollenberg Clinic arose in the context of a rapidly changing Canadian healthcare landscape. The post-World War II Canadian population was expanding with associated healthcare needs, and Winnipeg was no exception. Canadian physicians, who had trained in the 1920s and 1930s and who were at the height of their careers, some of whom who had recently returned from the War, recognized the need for comprehensive healthcare. These physicians were looking for new ways to

assist Canadians and to apply their medical skills more broadly. National publicly funded healthcare would not be developed for another 20 years, yet many physicians were committed to providing care to Canadians regardless of cost.

In response to Canadians' healthcare needs, numerous clinics in Canada, including those in Winnipeg, were created by groups of physicians based on the concept of "group practice": multiple healthcare professions providing care and services "under one roof." These early forms of group practice were precursors to more fully developed integrative care models that would proliferate in later decades.<sup>1</sup> In the 1950s, this "one-stop shopping" approach to healthcare, pioneered by the Mayo Clinic, was espoused by several physician groups in Winnipeg. According to expert sources, there were at least seven group practice clinics in operation in Winnipeg at this time: "This was a time when these clinics were being developed as a model for how to practice medicine" (Dr. Barbara Kaufman, daughter of Dr. Abe Hollenberg). A few clinics pre-dated the 1950s trend but continued to develop alongside the newer clinics. A number of clinics were family-based, as was the Hollenberg Clinic.

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## The Hollenberg Clinic: A unique contribution to research and practice

The Hollenberg Clinic consisted of at least 12 personnel: seven physicians (all graduates of the former Manitoba Medical College), one pharmacist, one optometrist/optician, one physiotherapist, and two administrative assistants. Of the seven physicians, five were brothers (Drs. Michael, Abe, Charles, Joseph and Jake Hollenberg), and two were wives of two of the brothers (Dr. Dorothy Hollenberg, née Osovsky, and Dr. Esther Hollenberg, née Gorsey). Of note, the two female physicians were amongst the first small group of female Jewish physicians in Canada. The two administrative assistants were also both sisters of the five medical brothers (Minnie Markel, née Hollenberg, and Bessie Hollenberg). Bessie Hollenberg became the Clinic manager, and Minnie Markel became the manager of the pharmacy (and was also married to the pharmacist).

Construction on the Hollenberg Clinic began in 1947. Designed by architect Frank Ruttan, the Clinic was constructed by the Commonwealth Construction Company of Winnipeg for a cost of \$180 000 at 394 Graham Avenue. Although there is no formal record, interviews suggest the Clinic likely opened in late 1948-early 1949. The Clinic was designed to be a large, rectangular two-story building made of Tyndall stone (a quarried stone in Manitoba known for its intricate fossil patterns) and brick, with a foundation enabling the possibility of adding two additional stories.

According to interviews with those familiar with the Hollenberg Clinic, the layout of the Clinic provided for at least ten patient rooms and five medical offices. For ease of access, the reception, pharmacy, and optician/optometrist were located on the main floor. The second floor contained a research library, while the basement housed the diagnostic services of lab and X-ray (assisted by an in-house radiology technician). It appears that the Hollenberg Clinic, as a group practice under one roof, offered at that time (1950) the largest breadth of clinic services in Winnipeg (when combining the two in-house diagnostic services along with the three noted allied health professions on site: pharmacy, optometry and physiotherapy). Originally founding their group practice in 1927 in an office building containing other businesses (the Boyd Building), in the late 1940s the five Hollenberg brothers moved their practice to the free-standing Hollenberg Clinic site. The remaining two physicians and extra services were added when the new Clinic site opened.

The seven physicians were a formidable team supported by the additional in-house clinic and diagnostic services. All seven were generalists in that, as a reflection of their medical training in the 1920s and 1930s, all Clinic physicians could perform most aspects of medicine at that time (including all diagnostics and surgeries). While specialties in Canada began to emerge in the early 1940s, specialty medicine in 1950s Canada was arguably still in its infancy. The physician that “could do everything” was common-

place. Most physicians at this time drew on their extensive training prior to World War II as generalists: “In those days specialties almost didn’t exist. Most doctors were physicians *and* surgeons... Every doctor did everything. There was nothing they wouldn’t try. There was no such thing as a ‘non-surgical doctor.’ There was no such thing as a ‘referring surgeon’” (Dr. Murray Hollenberg, son of Dr. Michael Hollenberg).

The Hollenberg Clinic physicians each had areas of medical focus and strength such as: anatomy, diagnostics, diabetes, infectious diseases, obstetrics, gynecology, orthopedics, pediatrics, and otolaryngology. According to interviews, the five brothers all held appointments at the University of Manitoba Faculty of Medicine, taught and lectured medical students, and participated in grading examinations. Two of the brothers (Abe and Joseph) were most involved in classroom teaching activities with medical students and onward activities with resident trainees. In addition to being general physicians, Michael and Abe Hollenberg received certification as specialists in internal medicine from the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada (RCPSC) in 1944. In 1947, Charles Hollenberg received specialist status in England as Fellow of the Royal College of Surgery in orthopedic surgery. Jake Hollenberg, the youngest of the brothers, also received recognition from the RCPSC in general surgery in 1948. Thus, four Hollenberg brothers ultimately became specialists in their fields. Of the two female physicians in the Clinic, Dorothy Hollenberg focused on pediatrics and lectured on women’s reproductive health, while Esther Hollenberg focused mainly on women’s reproductive health as a general practitioner. The Hollenberg Clinic was also a satellite teaching site for the University of Manitoba Faculty of Medicine for anatomy and physiology, including dissection. At that time, the Clinic may have been the only free-standing satellite site for students associated with the medical school.

The Hollenberg Clinic founded its practice on the integrative care model of the well-known Mayo Clinic, a pioneer in integrative care. Its services and research are still in operation and continue to lead integrative care models today. Located close to Winnipeg in Rochester, Minnesota, the Hollenberg Clinic physicians would refer patients there to confirm diagnoses made in Winnipeg. The brothers also visited the Mayo Clinic to evaluate its operations. Based on their commitment to integrative care, the Hollenberg Clinic physicians strongly believed that patients should receive the highest quality and most comprehensive care. They maintained that patients should not have to wait great lengths of time or travel far to be treated: “Their focus was to have a building where they could practice, and where their patients didn’t have to go out of the building... Where they could get an X-ray, could get their prescriptions filled, could get their eyes examined” (Dr. Barbara Kaufman).

Illustrating their commitment to integrative practice, archival documents show that at least two of the Clinic brothers (Michael and Abe) were also devoted

to clinical research. This was quite rare for medicine in the 1950s, in that physicians were often clinicians or researchers, not both. At the time, the discipline of “clinical research” was not yet fully established. Prior to opening the Clinic, these two brothers received post-graduate research training in the 1930s, both as National Research Fellows at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine in Baltimore. Their combined research focused on areas such as internal medicine, neurology, and hematology. This work resulted in a number of manuscripts examining adrenal and thyroid function, kidney function, jaundice, surgical sutures, eyesight, hernia, and pioneering treatment techniques for diabetes mellitus that were applied directly at the bedside.<sup>2–12</sup> Of note, one publication<sup>12</sup> by Dr. Michael Hollenberg on hernia was in the American journal, *Surgery*, with the title page caption, “From The Hollenberg Clinic,” implying that the Hollenberg Clinic was known internationally as a site for clinical research.

What singled out the Hollenberg Clinic from other group practices in Winnipeg was their emphasis not only on comprehensive care under a single roof, but also their direct link to clinical investigative medicine as well as its role in physician education. While other clinics focused mainly on grouping new specialties together, the Hollenberg Clinic physicians focused on the practice of medicine as a whole. Not many practices at the time could boast of a reference library, housed in one of the larger rooms in the Clinic, with concurrent gastric motility studies ongoing in the basement. The Hollenberg Clinic was an early Canadian innovator in integrative care models and clinical investigation. The number of physicians with wide-ranging clinical and specialty expertise, along with the addition of readily available in-house allied health and diagnostic services, combined with the focus on innovative and relevant research followed clearly in the footsteps of the Mayo Clinic. When the Hollenberg Clinic closed its group practice officially in 1958, the building became known as “The Doctor’s Building,” where Michael and Joseph Hollenberg still kept their practice while the rest of the building housed other medical practices. The building still stands today in downtown Winnipeg where it is now home to non-medical businesses.

Overall, the Hollenberg Clinic made historic contributions to Canadian healthcare and helped set the stage for the emerging field of clinical research. While other group practice clinics in Winnipeg operated in the 1950s, with a few even succeeding and expanding to the present day, the Hollenberg Clinic clearly made its mark: “Their healthcare delivery was first-rate. When you went there, they could do bloodwork, chemistry, X-ray. The main concept was, you didn’t just do the physical examination, you [the Hollenberg physicians] also ordered a bunch of tests, and you had the people [lab; X-ray] right there in the building, to do the tests” (Dr. Marty Hollenberg, son of Abe Hollenberg).

## Conclusion

It is meaningful to conclude this summary of the Hollenberg Clinic with an excerpt from one of the Clinic physicians, Dr. Abe Hollenberg, who gave the welcome address to the incoming class of medical students in 1956 at the University of Manitoba (published in the 1956 *University of Manitoba Medical Journal*).<sup>13</sup> Commenting on the role of medicine, he states that it encompasses:

... the obligation to regard every human being of whatever station in life, of whatever race or color, as a sacred trust when he presents himself to you for help. This obligation is all the more compelling as the total knowledge of the science and art of Medicine is the property of all humanity; because the contributions for its advancement have come from scientists of all races and of all lands. Medicine transcends all political and racial boundaries - it is universal and is meant for all (Dr. Abe Hollenberg, Honorary President of the Manitoba Medical Students Association, 1956-1957).

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