

The Treatment of Mental Illness in BC

1850 British Columbia's first recorded case of insanity: shortly after arriving in Victoria, a deranged Scottish immigrant allegedly assaults J.S. Helmcken, the jail doctor. The "maniac" is placed on the next ship back to Scotland.

1864 An infirmary for women is opened in Victoria, and includes a handful of female "lunatics" among its patients. However, treatment for mental illness is non-existent. Most mentally ill people are left to fend for themselves or, if deemed dangerous or troublesome, are locked in the crowded city jails.

1872 BC's first asylum for the insane opens: Royal Hospital, a converted cottage that previously served as Victoria's quarantine hospital.

1873 The Insane Asylums Act is passed, BC's first legislation addressing mental illness.

1878 The overcrowded Victoria asylum is closed and its 36 residents are moved to the newly-built Provincial Asylum for the Insane in New Westminster.

1883 Work therapy is introduced; asylum residents are put to work in the gardens.

1897 The legislature passes the Hospitals for the Insane Act, stipulating that mentally ill persons could be committed to hospital under an Urgency Order, which required two medical certificates. The asylum in New Westminster is renamed the Provincial Hospital for the Insane (PHI).

1899 PHI population surpasses 300. In the absence of social services, the hospital is housing developmentally disabled people and unwanted, physically handicapped children along with psychiatric patients. Complaints are heard of serious overcrowding, poor hygiene and living conditions, and inadequate care.

1901 The psychiatric literature lists the principal causes of insanity as heredity, intemperance, syphilis and masturbation.

1904 To relieve overcrowding, 48 male patients are transferred to a small asylum in Vernon, and the BC government purchases 1,000 acres in rural Coquitlam as the site for a new mental hospital.

1905 Using mostly patient labour, the Coquitlam site is cleared and diked, and Colony Farm is established to grow food for the PHI.

1909 Construction begins on the new "Hospital for the Mind" on the slopes above Colony Farm; the locale would become known as Essondale, in honour of Dr. Henry Esson Young, the cabinet minister who advocated the new hospital.

1912 John Davidson, Provincial Botanist, establishes western Canada's first botanical garden and arboretum on the Essondale grounds. Davidson would move the garden to the new UBC campus in 1916, but the unique collection of trees remains to this day. Meanwhile Colony Farm gains a reputation as the best farm in Western Canada, employing the latest in farming techniques to produce over 700 tons of crops and 20,000 gallons of milk in a year.

1913 The Hospital for the Mind is officially opened, taking 300 of the most seriously ill patients from the overcrowded New Westminster facility. The new building is considered the state of the art in psychiatric hospitals of the time. It would later be renamed the Male Chronic Building -- and in 1950, West Lawn.

1919 BC's first forensic psychiatric facility opens: the Provincial Mental Home for the Criminally Insane, on Vancouver Island, with an initial intake of nine patients transferred from PHI. By year's end it would house 99 inmates, all male.

1920 Two permanent dormitories are added to the growing complex at Colony Farm, providing 75 beds for patients working on the farm.

1924 The Acute Psychopathic Unit (Centre Lawn) opens at Essondale, originally used for testing and recommending treatments for new admissions.

1930 The 675-bed Female Chronic Unit (later called East Lawn) opens, allowing most of the female residents of PHI to transfer to Essondale. BC's first training school for psychiatric nurses is established in the new building.

1932 The first graduates from BC's school of psychiatric nursing receive their diplomas.

1934 The Veterans' Unit (the first section of what would later become Crease Clinic) opens at Essondale.

1936 The former Boys' Industrial School (built in 1920) is converted to the Essondale Home for the Aged, later known as Valleyview.

1940 BC's Mental Hospital Act is amended, deleting all references to "lunatic" and "insane"; this year also sees the first male graduates from the nursing school.

1942 Electro-convulsive therapy (ECT) is introduced, followed soon after by sulfa drugs, then psychosurgery; all of BC's mental health facilities are reported to be seriously overcrowded.

1946 The first female physician is hired at Essondale; however, the hospital will remain gender-segregated until the early 1960s.

1949 Crease Clinic of Psychological Medicine opens, after the second half of the building is constructed (a mirror image of the first half, built in 1934). At Colony Farm, the Veterans Unit (Riverside Building) opens, the forerunner of today's Forensic Psychiatric Hospital.

1950 Provincial Mental Health Services are amalgamated; New Westminster's Provincial Hospital for the Insane is renamed Woodlands School, repurposed as a residential facility for the developmentally disabled.

1951 Essondale reaches its peak population of 4,630 patients. Pennington Hall opens, providing recreational services to patients.

1955 230-bed Tuberculosis Unit (now called North Lawn) opens at Essondale. The introduction of improved medications, along with the opening of community mental health centres, boarding homes, and general hospital psychiatric wards, results in the start of a decline in Essondale's patient population.

1959 Essondale's last major patient residence, Valleyview 300, opens. The former Tranquille provincial tuberculosis sanitarium in Kamloops is converted to a residential facility for the developmentally disabled.

1964 The Colquitz forensic psychiatric hospital is closed and its patients transferred to Riverside Unit at Colony Farm. In the 1980s, Colquitz was renovated to become the Wilkinson Road Jail.

1965 The BC Mental Health Act is introduced, bringing a number of administrative changes.

1966 Essondale is renamed Riverview Hospital, although Valleyview continues to operate independently until 1986.

1972 The BC School of Psychiatric Nursing moves from Riverview to the BC Institute of Technology.

1974 BC's Forensic Psychiatry Act is enacted, creating the Forensic Psychiatric Services Commission (FPSC) to provide mental health services for persons in conflict with the law. Over the next two years Riverside Unit at Colony Farm is transformed into the Forensic Psychiatric Hospital. FPSC opens its Vancouver clinic, the first of what would later become a province-wide network of regional clinics.

1983 With Riverview's population continuing to fall, West Lawn is permanently closed. Farming operations at Colony Farm are discontinued.

1985 Signalling a nationwide trend to de-institutionalizing the developmentally disabled, Tranquille is closed; Woodlands will close in 1996.

1988 The BC Mental Health Society is established and takes over management of Riverview; the society's provincially-appointed trustees are replaced by a community-based board of governors in 1992.

1990 The Mental Health Initiative introduces a comprehensive plan for the development of mental health services throughout the province. It focuses on replacing Riverview with smaller, more specialized regional facilities.

1992 The Crease Clinic becomes the second large Riverview building to close; the building will later embark on a second career as a filming location.

1994 Riverview establishes Canada's first Charter of Patient Rights. After investigating patient complaints, the BC Ombudsman releases a report titled "Listening – A Review of Riverview Hospital". The two events signal a change in Riverview's relationship with its patients and family members.

1997 A new state-of-the-art Forensic Psychiatric Hospital opens at 70 Colony Farm Road in Port Coquitlam, replacing the original Riverside Unit.

1998 The Ministry of Health releases a new Mental Health Plan for BC, to be implemented over seven years. The plan envisions a health care system where people with mental illness have access to care as easily as to physical health care, with priority for services based on medical risk or extent of disability.

2001 The BC government announces a new administrative structure for health services, comprising five geographically-based regional health authorities plus the Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA), which is responsible for specialized, province-wide services. Riverview and the Forensic Psychiatric Services Commission are among the agencies placed under PHSA.

2002 The Riverview Redevelopment Project is announced. The aging institutional buildings at Riverview are to be gradually phased out, replaced by new smaller tertiary care facilities located in each of the five geographic regions of BC. Riverview patients will be transferred to facilities within those health regions in a "bed for bed" transfer process.

2005 With patient transfers to new regional facilities continuing to reduce Riverview's population, the 75-year-old East Lawn building is closed.

2007 As part of the Riverview Redevelopment Project, patients and support services housed at the 52-year-old North Lawn Building are re-located, and the building is decommissioned in March. Three months later, the building is temporarily reopened to accommodate patients from the Forensic Psychiatric Hospital at Colony Farm, briefly relocated due to the threat of Fraser River flooding.