

Published December 19, 2006

New Medical Lead and the Power of Prevention



Dr. Huiming Yang

Huiming Yang was still a young doctor when he saw the power of prevention. He was practicing in a relatively small province of China, with a population larger than Canada's. Diseases such as measles, polio, diphtheria and whooping cough took a devastating toll on the children.

Yang was part of a public health team that worked with various partners, including UNICEF, to develop a childhood immunization program. Their target to immunize 85 per cent of the children was met and surpassed within five years. Yang witnessed first-hand a dramatic drop in these preventable diseases. "Lives were being saved, just by a few simple shots," says Yang. "No matter how many hospitals you build you can never save as many lives as we did through immunization."

As the just-appointed medical lead for the colorectal screening program, Yang will once again have the opportunity to prevent disease and save lives through a simple screening program that he hopes will produce impressive results.

Yang's interest in public health and prevention brought him to Alberta in 1989. Between 1989 and 2005, Yang expanded his knowledge of public health issues, taking a Master's degree in medical microbiology in between positions at the Calgary General Hospital in infection control, and the Department of Defence at Canadian Forces Base Suffield. He also made time to "come back to medicine" and complete a five-year residency in community medicine. Yang's most recent position was as Deputy Chief Medical Health Officer for the province of Saskatchewan.

Yang has been lured back to Alberta to lead the team setting up what will be one of the first Canadian provincial screening programs for colorectal cancer. The disease, which affects the colon and the rectum, is the leading cause of cancer death among non-smokers and second only to lung cancer among the general population.

Screening for colorectal cancer on a regular basis has been shown to reduce deaths. The screening program will focus on healthy people aged 50 to 74 who show no symptoms or signs of the condition. The five year survival rate for colorectal cancer is about 90 per cent if detected early, but drops to 10 per cent or less if not detected until its advanced stage.

Yang is focused on the common goal – to reduce the incidence and mortality rates of colorectal cancer. Collaboration with the health regions and other partners across the province will be essential to the program's success.

Yang knows that an organized screening program for colorectal cancer has the potential to make a big difference to the health of general population in Alberta.