

McHale says senior citizens need to feel useful

By Kathryn Hazel
of The Free Press

Frances McHale, chairman of the Provincial Advisory Council on Aging, knows first hand the frustrations and challenges of the elderly.

Eight years ago she had a stroke. She remembers the painstaking process of learning how to speak again and the anger she felt when she couldn't open a pill bottle. She ended up smashing it with a hammer.

But those days are over. "I can do anything and everything," she told delegates attending the 10th national convention of the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada in London on Tuesday.

As head of the advisory council, she criss-crosses the country speaking to seniors' groups, attends conferences, edits a news-

'I can do anything, everything' women's conference told

letter for Ontario's 900,000 senior citizens and conducts workshops.

"The last five years have been the most exciting and challenging I have ever had."

The greatest need for seniors is to feel useful, that they have something to contribute to society, McHale told the 35 women at a workshop on the quality of life for seniors. "Uselessness is the greatest scourge of old age, not loneliness."

And seniors do contribute, she said. Fifty-eight per cent of hospital volunteers in Canada are senior citizens and 63 per cent of

all Meals on Wheels (a service that provides nutritious meals to elderly shut-ins) are delivered by seniors.

By the year 2000, McHale said, one in five Canadians will be 65 or older. With those kinds of numbers, the elderly will have a significant influence on society.

It's important their special needs be met to ensure the quality of their lives, she said. Public transportation that is cheap enough and convenient enough for them to use, decent pensions, support services to allow

them to stay in their own homes and a society that respects them are all essential.

"You will spend at least one-third of your life in retirement. Should those years be any less interesting or useful? But this country is just beginning to recognize the value of old people."

She told the delegates to become involved by serving on nursing home boards, auxiliaries and residents' councils, encouraging senior citizen representation on consumer advisory boards and, in general, making them feel wanted.

"Seniors want someone to care about and someone to love them; someone to do things for and someone to have things done for them. Old is when you have nothing to look forward to. My goal is to give seniors something to look forward to."



FRANCES McHALE
- - - overcame stroke

Women told equality clause requires work

Women are going to have to work hard if the newly acclaimed equality clause in the Charter of Rights is to work for them, a Toronto lawyer told delegates to the 10th national convention of the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada in London on Tuesday.

Speaking at a workshop on the charter and how it affects women, Beth Atcheson, a member of the Women's Law Association of Ontario, said Canada's new constitution, of which the charter is a part, "is a kind of superlaw."

It applies to the relationship between government and citizen, including the administration of municipalities, police, hospitals and school boards, she said. It's up to the courts to decide how the equality clause will be interpreted, so women's groups have to put forward good cases to test the law.

"Courts use precedent, so it's important to effect those precedents because they govern all the cases in the future. The charter is there but it's going to take all of us working hard to make it work for us."

Organizations such as the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund Inc. have seven or eight cases before the courts just for that purpose, Atcheson said.

Affirmative action plans are another way to enable women to overcome the historical effects of sexual discrimination, she said, adding affirmative action has worked well for other groups in Canada. She gave the federal government's policy of promoting bilingualism in the civil service and the special benefits extended to veterans after the Second World War as two examples.

Women have suffered discrimination because the work they do is consistently under-valued, she said. With more women in positions of influence, this will change, but it will take time — a long time.

A recent report she read stated that "at the current rate the Ontario government (is) moving women up through the ranks, it will take 83 years."

Atcheson's workshop was one of 14 held at the convention on the University of Western Ontario campus Tuesday afternoon, covering topics as diverse as water quality, child abuse, family violence, health education, technological change and pornography.

Today, the 1200 delegates will be going on a bus tour. The convention ends Thursday night.