

# Remembering Dr. Benita Cohen: A Tribute to a Life Well-lived

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**Cite as:** Cusack, C., Schultz, A., Scruby, L., Dyck, N, Martin, D., Betker, C. & van Daalen-Smith, C. (2022). Remembering Dr. Benita Cohen: A tribute to a life well-lived. **Invited Commentary.** *Witness: The Canadian Journal of Critical Nursing Discourse*, 4(2), pp 1-4 <https://doi.org.10.25071/2291-5796.134>

To honor the legacy of Dr. Benita Cohen, this special issue of *Witness: The Canadian Journal of Critical Nursing Discourse* is dedicated in remembrance of her. On November 17, 2021, Benita passed away unexpectedly and far too early as she still had ideas to explore, systems to challenge, baseball games to watch, novels to read, and other memories to co-create with people across Canada – her absence is and will ongoingly be notable. Benita’s career has educational roots in political science and nursing, which led to public health positions in Iqaluit and Ontario. Her graduate education was completed in Community Health Sciences at the University of Manitoba, where she was advised by Dr. John O’Neil. In 2008, the World Health Organization’s Commission on Social Determinants of Health (CSDH, 2008) documented a vision Benita had been working towards for decades – challenging us to improve the social, political, and economic conditions that perpetuate avoidable inequities. Benita’s passion held a particular focus with challenging Public Health Nurses’ (PHN)/Community Health Nurses’ (CHN) roles to redress health inequities and promote social justice. The legacy of Dr. Cohen’s career was recognized at the June 2022 Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA) Annual Conference, where posthumously she received the Dr. R. D. Defries Award. In dedication to Dr. Cohen, the closing

plenary of the CPHA Public Health 2022 conference was a memorial lecture delivered by her former doctoral student, Dr. Shelley Marshall. Both honour Dr. Cohen and her outstanding contributions to the fields of public health, healthcare, and nursing. Highlights of her contributions are shared below.

Dr. Cohen’s academic career as an Associate Professor with the College of Nursing at the University of Manitoba was dedicated to building capacity within public health to address social and structural inequities in health. Benita was an avid supporter for the integration of a social justice and health equity lens in health professional education. While Benita was gentle and soft spoken with an encouraging spirit, her compelling messages engendered positive action. In her role as University of Manitoba Faculty Association representative, careful consideration and reflection on discussions resulted in thoughtful responses based on advocacy for students, colleagues, and a healthy work environment. She readily acknowledged colleagues for their outstanding work, resulting in motivation to continue their tireless efforts. As an educational leader, she shaped the careers of dozens of graduate and hundreds of undergraduate nursing students. Benita challenged each one to think critically about their nursing roles and to influence social change

through their practice and policy efforts. Evidence of Dr. Cohen's vision for the essential role nurses have in redressing health equity as a core competence is notable in the publication examples listed in Table 1.0.

**Table 1.0: Co-authored Publications Specific to Nursing practice**

- The role of public health agencies in addressing child and family poverty: Public health nurses' perspectives ([Cohen & McKay, 2010](#))
- Community health clinical education in Canada ([Cohen & Gregory, 2009a, 2009b](#))
- Development of the role of public health nurses in addressing child and family poverty: A framework for action ([Cohen & Reutter, 2007](#))
- Barriers to population-focused health promotion: The experience of public health nurses in the province of Manitoba ([Cohen, 2006](#))

Dr. Cohen's academic career included being an investigator on over 20 funded studies, where she collaborated with local and national research teams exploring health inequities and social justice. Dr. Cohen emulated true collaboration with an authentic and genuine approach of active listening and engagement with structurally disadvantaged groups, key stakeholders, and research team members. The focus of investigation was placed on context and society, our systems, and structural and social determinants of health, rather than individuals and their behaviors. Outcomes from these studies were shared through 24 peer-reviewed journal articles, several book chapters, and countless reports. Benita's respectful and humble demeanor was present at a variety of academic conferences and invited healthcare meetings. For decades, she was a regular attendee at the CPHA Annual Conference.

Dr. Cohen generously shared her expertise with healthcare decision makers, policy makers, and leaders in Manitoba, Canada, and globally. She inspired future-oriented perspectives within

healthcare policy and system-level initiatives focused on addressing structural and social determinants of inequities. Locally, Benita collaborated with the Winnipeg Regional Health Authority and Population and Public Health Branch, Manitoba Health, Seniors and Active Living, where she influenced development of best practice tools for health equity and advocacy ([Cohen & Marshall, 2017](#)), health equity impact assessments ([Cohen et al., 2016](#)), and health equity core competencies for public health managers. Nationally, Benita collaborated with public health partners to build organizational capacity to advance health equity in public health organizations ([Cohen et al., 2018](#); [Cohen et al., 2013](#)), as well as working specifically in Ontario, Nunavut, and Nova Scotia. Benita's social justice and equity perspectives guided investigating Canadian tobacco control initiatives ([Cohen et al., 2011](#)). She worked with the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health, which included development of a widely used health equity online course and acting as a visiting scholar. Globally, Dr. Cohen's influence reached Australia, parts of the United States, and France, as each place considered novel approaches to address health inequities structurally.

Dr. Cohen's vision and generous spirit influenced the practice of nurses through her work with professional associations and organizations. The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) consulted with Dr. Cohen to revision their 'Social Justice Gauge' evaluative tool. In the spring of 2022, Dr. Cohen was awarded posthumously the Advocacy Award from the Association of Regulated Nurses of Manitoba. The nomination was made by the College of Nursing at the University of Manitoba, recognizing Benita as a supportive and effective change agent across diverse nursing communities in Manitoba and Canada. Benita's spirit and vision inspired CHN and PHN workforce development and their practice as evident in the documents listed in Table 2.0. More recently, Dr. Cohen became a light bearer for and ambassador of the profession of nursing, when her national reputation led to her election as the Chair for the CPHA Board of Directors in 2021 – a position she humbly cherished.

**Table 2.0 CHN and PHN Workforce Development Document Contributions**

- Core Competencies for Public Health Practitioners in Canada ([Public Health Agency of Canada, 2008](#))
- Standards of Practice for Community Health Nursing, released in 2003, 2008, and 2011 ([Community Health Nurses of Canada, 2011](#))
- Public Health Nursing Discipline Specific Competencies ([Community Health Nurses of Canada, 2009](#))
- Public Health ~ Community Health Nursing Practice in Canada: Roles and Activities ([Canadian Public Health Association, 2010](#)).

Dr. Benita Cohen was one of the first critical nurse scholars contacted when the founder of Witness was establishing the journal's vision, ethos, and editorial collective. She advised the board in her typical gentle way, dropping profound considerations not only about what the journal would do, but who it might indirectly serve. Surprised, if not shocked, was Benita's response to being asked to join - without hesitation she said "I'm in. Let me know what I can do." Through her contributions she emerged as an associate editor, serving as a sage sounding board for the editor, collaboratively planning special issues, and brainstorming for peer reviewers that understood the journal's commitment to capacity-building and a positive experience for prospective authors. The role and opportunity to be involved in this emergent journal were profound for Dr. Cohen – as the journal created new spaces for messages that resonated with her core.

We are honored for this opportunity to eereflect on and remember the amazing career of Dr. Benita Cohen: an exceptional Canadian community health nurse, researcher, educator, mentor, and health policy consultant. Benita possessed a humble, often quiet presence – yet, when she spoke, her brilliance shone brightly, and yes, a quirky sense of humor. Her vision has shaped the fields of public health and community health nursing, and her impact will

be felt for many generations to come – some might say she knocked it out of the park. The legacy of Dr. Cohen's spirit and career will ongoingly challenge each and every nurse to continue the journey of advancing our role in redressing health inequities and social justice in Canada and globally.

The authors declare no potential conflict of interest nor associated funding. Ethical permission is not required for this invited commentary.

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