

The Benefits of Incorporating the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions Calls to Action for Indigenous Health Care

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Abstract

In 2015 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission presented 94 calls to action that would be beneficial in furthering the reconciliation efforts between Canada and Indigenous people. Of these 94 calls to action, Actions 18 through 24 touch on the topic of health. This review explores the benefits and importance of future physicians understanding and implementing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action in their practice. This review also discusses the importance for future physicians to understand the historical impact that continues to affect the health of Indigenous people and how these impacts can be addressed through methods that would best suit Indigenous well-being and healing.

Keywords: TRC, indigenous health, indigenous knowledge

Introduction

While Western medicine may recognize mental and spiritual wellbeing, the resources provided for these components is not equal to the resources spent on physicians and physical wellbeing (M. Cook, personal communication, June 4, 2020). Social access to health care is also limited for Indigenous people because the health care systems do not account for culture or language which can often be a barrier, as well as the social and economic determinants of Indigenous people's health¹. Culture plays a role because different groups can face additional health risks because of their socioeconomic environment that is often determined by dominant cultural values "that contribute to the perpetuation of conditions (marginalization, stigmatization, loss or devaluation of language and culture and lack of access to culturally appropriate health care and services)"². One must begin with a consideration of the historical legacy of colonization, forced removal from traditional lands that Indigenous people often had spiritual connections with, cultural genocide and, the history of the residential school system³. These variables can all play a role in the health and well-being of Indigenous people due to various stressors as well as the sense of loss and the effects that it has on the people. "It is a well-known fact that First Nations peoples in Canada suffer from a poorer quality of life, as measured by mortality and morbidity, as compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts"⁴.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was created in 2008, with a mandate set to focus on six areas

as follows:

- "(a) Acknowledge the Residential School experiences, impacts, and consequences
- (b) provide a holistic, culturally appropriate and safe setting for former students, their families, and communities as they come forward to the Commission
- (c) Witness, support, promote and facilitate truth and reconciliation events at both the national and community levels
- (d) promote awareness and public education of Canadians about the IRS systems and its impacts
- (e) identify sources and create as complete an historical record as possible of the IRS system and legacy. The record shall be preserved and made accessible to the public for future study and use
- (f) produce and submit to the Parties of the Agreement a report including recommendations to the Government of Canada concerning the IRS system and experience including: the history, purpose, operation and supervision of the IRS system, the effect and consequences of IRS (including systemic harms, intergenerational consequences and the impact on human dignity) and the ongoing legacy of the residential schools
- (g) support commemoration of former Indian Residential School students and their families in ac-

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cordance with the Commemoration Policy Directive”⁵

In the process of meeting the mandate, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission released multiple calls to action that focused on child welfare, education, language and culture, health, justice, and reconciliation⁵, in an attempt to rectify the harms and damages caused by the legacy of residential schools and to further the process of reconciliation⁶.

Action 22

Action 22 calls on “those who can effect change within the Canadian health-care system to recognize the value of Aboriginal healing practices and use them in the treatment of Aboriginal patients in collaboration with Aboriginal healers and Elders”⁵. For one to be able to recognize the values of Indigenous healing practices, it is important that there is an understanding of what these practices encompass. When it comes to the overall wellbeing of Indigenous people, the Indigenous perspective places importance on not only physical wellbeing, as is common in the Western worldview, but also places equal importance on mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. It is only through focus on all four aspects that one is able to be truly healthy. This teaching is seen within the Medicine Wheel, which consists of four interconnected sections (physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual), and it is when these four sections are in balance that Indigenous people are able to achieve and maintain good health as they promote overall wellbeing⁷.

A major part of the Indigenous worldview consists of the connectedness to the land which plays a central role in the development of health and resilience of Indigenous people⁸. Many of the historical policies that were put into place in an attempt to assimilate and oppress Indigenous peoples have had a detrimental impact on maintaining their cultural identity. This ultimately led to a loss of culture and cultural identity in many individuals and communities. Reconnecting with the land and participating in cultural traditions and ceremonies allows for the restoration of Indigenous cultural identity, creating a sense of belonging, and overall contributing to positive health outcomes. Within Isbister-Bear et al’s research, it is found that health promotion programs that are centered on community and Indigenous perspective are fundamental to improving the health and wellbeing of Indigenous populations⁸. Health Canada has also stated that promotion of Indigenous perspectives can improve “the skills and knowledge of individuals, families, and communities, thereby improving wellness at all levels (Health Canada, 2015, p.15)”⁸.

The Aboriginal Healing Foundation created multiple reports on the effects of residential schools as well as the type of healing that the survivors participated in to overcome the trauma that they experienced during their time in these schools. The healing that was most often utilized was Indigenous healing methods,

which were also rated the most effective (see Figure 1)⁹. When Indigenous worldviews and cultural continuity are encouraged, there is a fall in suicide rates, intentional injury, and unintentional injury⁸. As medical students and physicians within Manitoba, which has a large Indigenous population, it is important to remember that there are greater positive outcomes for Indigenous patients when they are able to utilize traditional healing practices and these are often seen as more effective in their healing.

Action 23

Action 23 calls on “all levels of government to: (I) increase the number of Aboriginal professionals working in the health-care field, (II) ensure the retention of Aboriginal health-care providers in Aboriginal communities, (III) provide cultural competency training for all health-care professionals”⁵. Within the University of Manitoba there has been an increase in Indigenous medical students. The class of 2017 graduated with nine students that self-declared as Indigenous¹⁰, while the class of 2023 has fifteen students of self-declared Indigenous ancestry. This is “the highest number of Indigenous students reported for an incoming class”¹¹. This increase in the number of self-declared Indigenous students is a major step forward and will likely help increase retention of Indigenous health-care providers within Indigenous communities as it is common for Indigenous students to want to return to and work in their home communities. It is important for Indigenous youth to see health care providers that are also Indigenous as this helps breakdown certain cultural barriers while also being a positive influence.

Action 24

Action 24 calls on “medical and nursing schools in Canada to require all students to take a course dealing with Aboriginal health issues, including the history and legacy of residential schools” and other historical policies that impact Indigenous people⁵. It is important for future physicians to have a baseline knowledge of Indigenous history as this can impact the care Indigenous patients receive. There are many significant barriers for Indigenous communities within Canada when it comes to accessing health care and as a result there are often unmet health care needs¹². Indigenous voices are often silenced within the healthcare system as “conventional biomedical ideologies and cultures have shaped healthcare policy”¹³.

When it comes to providing care for Indigenous patients it is important to address the “power relationship between service providers and patients”¹³. It is important to note that Indigenous patients will likely have different needs than those from the dominant culture, failing to recognize this difference will likely lead to Indigenous patients feeling unheard and unsatisfied with the care they are receiving¹⁴. Physicians who do not have a sense of cultural awareness, or lack consideration and respect for Indigenous perspectives and culture will not adequately meet the needs of the



Figure 1: The Aboriginal Healing Foundation conducted research on the various healing methods and asked participants to rate how effective they found the services. The services that were directly related to Indigenous healing methods were rated the highest (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2006). In 2005, The Aboriginal Healing Foundation researched the 1500+ communities and groups that they connected with. During this research these communities and groups were asked what had helped the community people the most in terms of healing and leading healthier lifestyles.

patients they are providing care for¹⁴. Without a baseline knowledge or understanding of Indigenous health issues, it would allow certain stereotypes of Indigenous patients to be perpetuated and as a result would be damaging to the physician/ patient relationship¹⁴. There is a significant amount of research that identifies a connection between the historical and current impacts of colonization, residential schools, and “the high rates of alcohol and substance abuse, interpersonal violence, suicide, and mental illness and disorders” that currently face Indigenous patients⁸. The policies of the past continue to have significant impacts on Indigenous patients and their health outcomes⁸. Without prior knowledge of Indigenous history, Indigenous patients could be viewed as having poor health behaviours and choices, and that they are ultimately “to blame for poor compliance levels”¹⁴. These negative stereotypes of Indigenous patients “have the potential to influence health professional attitudes, interactions, and treatment”¹⁴ which is why it is vital for the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions Calls to Action, specifically Action 24, be honoured.

Conclusion

Having Indigenous perspectives and culture as a central component of Indigenous care would result in better health outcomes and promote greater healing. The Truth and Reconciliation Commissions Calls to Action recognize the importance of this, as well as the value of traditional healing methods and the important place it has within Indigenous worldviews.

As physicians and medical students working with Indigenous patients it is important to remember the significance of Indigenous culture and the positive impact that it can have in the overall healing and wellbeing of Indigenous patients. It is also important to remember and recognize various historical policies and the negative impacts that stem from those policies. A lot of the time these policies and laws contributed to the social determinants of health that impact indigenous peoples such as their ability to have cultural continuity, educa-

tion, employment and income, and self-determination. These historical policies also had negative impacts on healthy child development, and personal health practices and coping skills. When working with Indigenous patients it is important to recognize the intergenerational trauma that residential schools and other colonial systems had and the various impacts that this had on the overall health of Indigenous people.

It is important for future physicians to understand the historical impact that continues to affect the health of Indigenous people to be able to provide them with the best care that we can and to be aware that the issues they face are often different from our non-indigenous patients.

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