

Call to Action #24: Understanding Aboriginal health issues by the medical community



Healthcare worker (photo credit: Unsplash.com)

Section One: About the author



SG is a first-year student attending Cambrian College's Medical Laboratory Technology program as a second career. New to Sudbury, he enjoys hiking outdoors and loves the wide-open wilderness and smaller towns of Northern Ontario. After graduating from his program SG hopes to stay in the region and work as a medical laboratory technologist. He chose Truth and

Reconciliation as one of his general elective courses to better understand the perspective of Indigenous clients he may work with in the clinic setting.

Section Two: Introduce the call to action

Call to Action #24 from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission involves the education of new health care providers. It calls upon schools to require students in nursing or other medical programs to take a course in Aboriginal health issues. The course should develop an understanding of the historical treatment of Indigenous peoples in Canada, treaties and rights, and traditional knowledge and practices. The course should also teach students skills to eliminate racism and embrace cultural diversity in their practice.

This call to action is important to me professionally because I will be working in a health care setting and interacting with patients to perform blood collections. Compared to Southern Ontario, many patients in Northern Ontario may be Indigenous and I think it is important to be aware of the barriers to health care that exist and how I can help address them.

All persons living in Canada should see this Call to Action as important. Access to health care is a universal right in Canada and that means that all Canadians should be comfortable seeking medical care and should be treated with respect and compassion. For Indigenous peoples this is important for two reasons. First, racist, colonial attitudes have been used to diminish the value of Indigenous peoples as second-class citizens. Among other outcomes, this has led to Indigenous children being forced to attend church-run residential schools, where children were prevented from learning their own culture and experienced numerous abuses. Training in health care programs is important because the harms from residential schools led to a cycle of trauma in Indigenous communities, a distrust of government, and a loss of cultural knowledge. It is important for health care providers to be knowledgeable about the racist

attitudes that lead to past abuses, the trauma that some survivors have experienced, and the importance some Indigenous patients may have on reconnecting with their culture and incorporating traditional practices in their healthcare plan.

On the website, Beyond the 94 (<https://newsinteractives.cbc.ca/longform-single/beyond-94>), Call to Action #24 is currently in progress, with projects proposed. At present, courses on Indigenous health issues are offered by medical schools, but are not mandatory.

Section Three: Celebrate the good work

Several universities in Canada have responded to the TRC's calls to action and now require students to take an Indigenous studies course as part of their programs. Some nursing programs have even collaborated with local knowledge keepers to teach students about Indigenous health issues and cultural safety. Below are a few universities working to make a difference.

Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, British Columbia, has developed their nursing program to include Indigenous ways of knowing and reflect the recommendations in the TRC Calls to Action and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This includes incorporating Indigenous health into all courses, as well as delivering a third-year course, Interdisciplinary Indigenous Health, which draws on Indigenous Knowledge and a “two-eyed seeing” approach to learning.

(<https://www.tru.ca/nursing/aboriginal-nursing.html>).

The University of British Columbia Okanagan Campus' nursing program includes Aboriginal Health and cultural safety modules (named SWKNAQINX, or “Okanagan”) that explore cultural identity and racism in healthcare, with a focus on local Okanagan tradition and knowledge

(<https://nursing.ok.ubc.ca/indigenous-initiatives/>).



UBC Okanagan. (2017, March 23). Donation Leads to Expanded Cultural Safety Curriculum [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/rg-ff6-S60E>

Other Universities are taking a broader approach by requiring that all students take at least one class on Indigenous studies as part of their program requirements, including the University of Winnipeg (<https://www.uwinnipeg.ca/indigenous/indigenous-course-requirement/index.html>), Lakehead University, Thunder Bay (<https://www.lakeheadu.ca/indigenous/icr>), and Trent University, Peterborough (<https://www.trentu.ca/indigenous/icr>).

It is significant that Universities are not only offering curricula on Indigenous studies, including healthcare and cultural safety, but that these courses are becoming a necessary part of students' programs. This sends the message that learning Indigenous studies is just as important for a well-rounded education as learning maths or English.

Section Four: Call for more

Even though not all universities and colleges require students to take courses on Indigenous studies, these courses are available. For high school students preparing to attend university or college: make the effort to take a course to learn more about Indigenous peoples. If your school doesn't have an

Indigenous course requirement, or even offer Indigenous courses, ask the program coordinator to consider making the requirement or offering those courses.

Further Reading:

Macdonald, N. (2015, November 19). Required reading: Making Indigenous classes mandatory.

Macleans. <https://www.macleans.ca/education/making-history-2/>

Macleans article explaining why all students should take an Indigenous studies course.

White Coat, Black Art. (2020, November 27). Fear of racism deters many Indigenous people from seeking medical treatment, says health-care leader. CBC Radio.

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/whitecoat/fear-of-racism-deters-many-indigenous-people-from-seeking-medical-treatment-says-health-care-leader-1.5817730>

Audio, text and video about how racism in healthcare affects Indigenous patients. This follows the death of Joyce Echaquan in a Québec hospital after having her condition dismissed and instead receiving racist insults. A stark reminder about the reality of racism in Canada.