

Aboriginal Perspectives on Health and Wellness: A Holistic Approach

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Elder Betty McKenna

❖ *“We are like trees. Our roots are put down very deep. And we take things from the four directions and we take them into our lives. And if you pull us up by the roots, we are lost. We have to go back and find those roots, find those beginnings that are strong so that we can live a good life”.*

❖ *Elder Betty McKenna, 2005.*



Defining Aboriginal People

- ❖ Aboriginal is defined as “Indian, Inuit and Métis people of Canada” (s. 35.1 of the *Canadian Constitution*).
- ❖ Aboriginal people are very diverse.
- ❖ Identities have been shaped, and continue to be shaped by colonial and neo-colonial policy.
- ❖ The attempted assimilation (cultural genocide) of Aboriginal peoples continues to impact all Aboriginal people today but women in particular.



The Indian Act

- ❖ Between 1876 and 1985 one's "Indianness" was traced through the male line.
- ❖ Indian women who married non-Indians ceased to be Indians under the Act.
- ❖ These women were not Indians according to the Act but neither were they considered to be Canadian citizens between 1876 and 1960.
- ❖ Indian men could not lose status through marriage, in fact, if they married non-status women, those women **GAINED** status under the Act.



Bill C-31 (1985) – A Revision to the Indian Act

- ❖ In 1985, the Act was revised because it conflicted with the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*.
- ❖ The revision exasperated rather than repaired the problem.
- ❖ Although assimilation was “officially abolished” in 1973, many consider assimilation policy to be alive and well.
- ❖ Consider the following chart:



Indian Act “Math”

- ❖ 6 (1) – means you had Indian status in 1985
- ❖ 6 (2) – had to apply to regain status in or after 1985
- ❖ $6 (1) + \text{NS} = 6 (2)$
- ❖ $6 (2) = \text{NS} = \text{NS}$
- ❖ BUT:
- ❖ $6 (1) + 6 (2) = 6 (1)$
- ❖ $6 (2) + 6 (2) = 6 (1)$



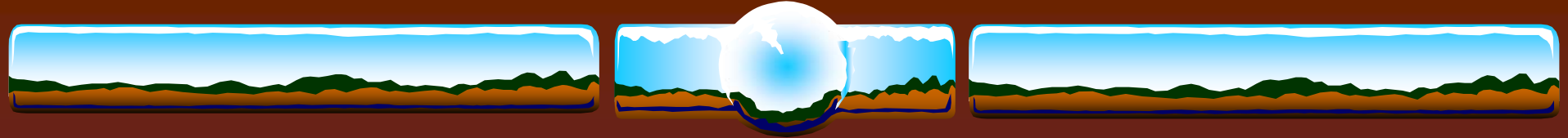
Other Restrictions of the Indian Act

- ❖ Pass and permit system (1886-1940s)
- ❖ Residential Schools (mid-1800s-1996)
- ❖ Unable to hire a lawyer (1920-1951)
- ❖ Prohibition of ceremonies and dress (1888-1951)
- ❖ Indian Agent controlled every aspect of reserve life



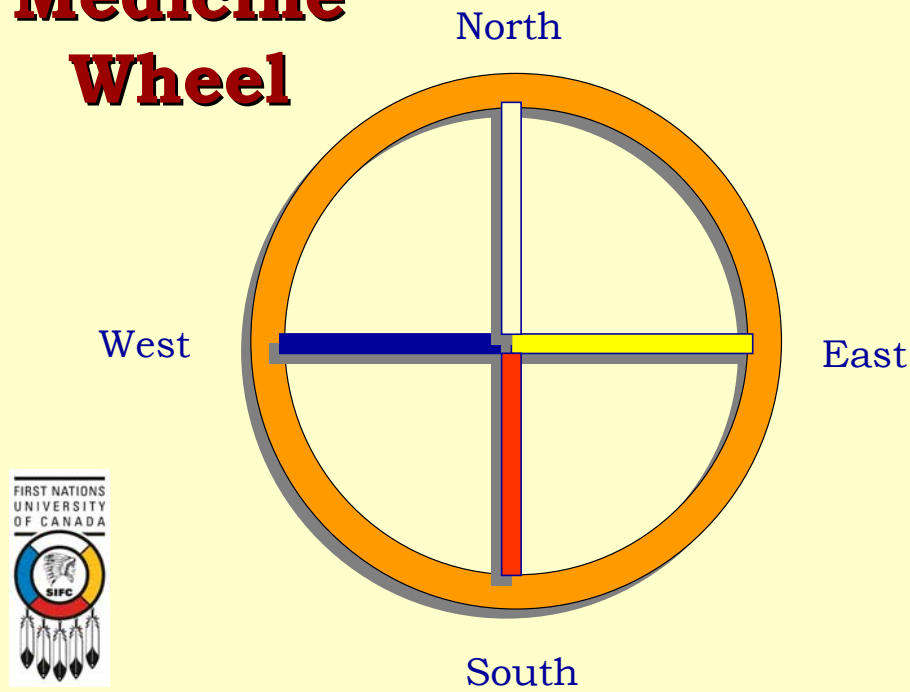
Defining Health: An Aboriginal World View

- ❖ Definition of health using a First Nations' philosophy:
 - ❖ *Holistic perspective or “Medicine Wheel Philosophy” – Physical, mental, spiritual and emotional harmony/balance*
 - ❖ *Resembles the Population Health Model which asserts health is the mental, physical, emotional, spiritual, occupational and social aspects of well-being.*



Medicine Wheel

Directions



Source: Aboriginal Cultural Awareness Program, First Nations University of Canada, 2004.



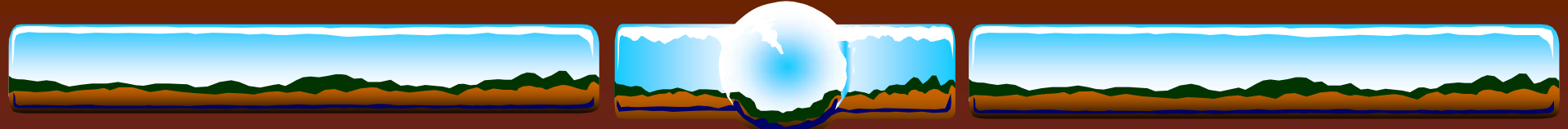
Current Health Status

- ❖ Aboriginal people face higher rates of chronic and infectious disease, lower life expectancy, higher infant mortality rates.
- ❖ Aboriginal people experience the highest poverty and unemployment rates, highest incarceration rates, have lower education levels, face higher levels of addiction and have higher rates of domestic violence.



Why?

- ❖ Continued impact of colonization on all Aboriginal peoples (First Nations, Inuit, Metis);
- ❖ Western model is still very focused on physical health;
- ❖ Aboriginal people suffer from loss of identity and self-esteem.
- ❖ Many broad and varied issues *determine our health.*



How Do We Address Contemporary Aboriginal Ill-Health?

- ❖ Holistic approach is key
- ❖ Addressing underlying root causes of ill-health (consistent with holistic view of health)
- ❖ Re-claiming/re-discovering our identities
- ❖ Understand that physical health is a manifestation of other emotional, mental and spiritual issues.



Some Traditional Aspects of Health and Well-being

- ❖ Use the teachings of the wheel or sacred circle:
- ❖ Elder Betty McKenna's Anishnabe interpretation:
 - ❖ East – a new beginning (yellow)
 - ❖ South – water, a time for fasting and vision (blue)
 - ❖ West – end of the day, reflect, repair the spirit (red)
 - ❖ North – strength of wisdom – having it and sharing it (white).
 - ❖ We are always in the center on Mother Earth



Some Traditional Aspects of Health and Well-being

- ❖ Ceremony is important. All ceremonies are sacred.
- ❖ Smudge
- ❖ Sweatlodge
- ❖ Pipe ceremony
- ❖ Fullmoon Ceremony
- ❖ Sundance/Raindance
- ❖ Feast
- ❖ Picking/Gathering medicines



Some Traditional Aspects of Health and Well-being

❖ All human beings need:

❖ Growth

❖ Order

❖ Adequacy

❖ Love

❖ Social Approval

❖ Security

❖ Self-esteem



Thank You!!

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