

Poor health among indigenous peoples a question of cultural loss as well as poverty

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The health problems of Indigenous peoples around the world are intimately tied to a number of unique factors, such as colonization, globalization, migration, and loss of land, language and culture. These factors remain even after the "typical" social problems facing the poor, such as inadequate housing, unemployment, and low education levels are addressed, according to Dr. Malcolm King, lead author of a paper to be published tomorrow in the *Lancet*.

Based at the University of Alberta, and currently Scientific Director of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research's Institute of Aboriginal Peoples' Health, Dr. King, along with coauthors Dr. Alexandra Smith (University of Toronto) and Dr. Michael Gracey (Unity of First People of Australia in Perth, Australia), wrote the paper to provide health professionals and policy makers with insights into the special culturally based needs and social context of Indigenous peoples.

Drawing on a growing body of research work done in cooperation with Aboriginal Peoples across Canada, Dr. King highlights a frame of reference where wellness involves a balance between the person, his/her family, community, and environment.

"Wellbeing for Aboriginal Peoples is more than physical health or absence of disease, it's about 'being alive well' or 'mno bmaadis' as they say in the Anishinabek language," says King. "All four elements of life - physical, emotional, mental and spiritual - are traditionally represented in the four directions of the medicine wheel, and traditional healing often implicates the whole community, cleansing the environment around a person as well as his or her body."

"That's why factors like retention of Aboriginal languages, cultural practices, self determination, and respect for Elders is so important," King continues. "And that's why we have so much to do

to repair the damage done by so many disruptive assimilationist practices in the past, such as cutting off children from their families at residential schools, or suppression of cultural practices that conflicted with European ideas."

Programs to address these issues should be viewed as complex clinical interventions, Dr. King says, with health researchers, social scientists and clinicians working together hand in hand with Indigenous peoples to identify the most pressing needs and most appropriate and workable solutions.

Source: Canadian Institutes of Health Research

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