

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Understanding the crisis in Indigenous health

The AMA's Fall 2023 Representative Forum, held September 22 and 23 in Edmonton, marked an important milestone for the Alberta Medical Association with the inclusion of a special session focused on Indigenous health. During the session, delegates and observers came together to learn about and reflect on how colonialism and systemic racism have shaped the ongoing health inequities that impact Indigenous Peoples throughout Alberta and across Canada.

Spearheaded by the Indigenous Health Committee of the AMA, the three-part session was held on the first day of the Representative Forum. It began with a viewing of [*The Unforgotten*](#), a film created to raise awareness, incite reflection and spark conversations about how to make meaningful change happen in health care for Indigenous Peoples living in Canada. The five-part anthology film runs 36 minutes in total, and although each story can be watched individually, RF attendees viewed it in its entirety. Created with the support of the Canadian Medical Association, *The Unforgotten* aims to inspire compassion and conversations among physicians and others about how to address the concerning gap in health outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.

Attendees then gathered for a special Indigenous-themed lunch, created by acclaimed chef Shane Chartrand, that celebrated Indigenous food and culture. The meal featured ingredients and seasonings that honour and respect the relationship Indigenous Peoples have with nature and the animals and plants they harvest. The family-style presentation encouraged sharing and discussion.

Following the luncheon, the session resumed with a panel discussion featuring highly respected Indigenous physicians, Dr. Nicole Cardinal, Dr. Lindsay Crowshoe and Dr. Esther Tailfeathers, who shared their thoughts and insights. The panel members spoke honestly about what they see in their own communities and some of their own personal experiences. They then answered questions from RF delegates. It was a powerful and at times uncomfortable experience intended to help attendees move toward reconciliation and gain a better understanding of what must change in our health care system to address systemic racism.

As Dr. Crowshoe explained during the session, "As doctors, do we give space to listen with open ears and big hearts? Do we listen with care, or do we close that space because of our own discomfort?"

Moving the AMA Policy Statement on Indigenous health forward

The AMA's [Policy Statement on Indigenous Health](#) was created in 2017 and notes that "the AMA is committed to reconciliation, collaboration, meaningful empowered community engagement and knowledge exchange with Indigenous Peoples. Reconciliation in the area of health service means advocacy to achieve not only quality but also equity rooted in the social and cultural contexts of Indigenous Peoples." The [Indigenous Health Committee](#) (IHC) was established to develop, implement and promote the recommendations contained in the policy statement. The Indigenous health session at the Fall 2023 RF addressed some of the priorities identified in the policy statement.

The crisis in Indigenous health has been in the spotlight in recent months, with many media stories reporting on systemic racism in our health care system. The AMA has created a [web page](#) that includes links to some of those news stories and made Indigenous health one of the key issues in their election information campaign, noting that First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples in Alberta have higher rates of chronic illness, mental health challenges and addictions due to the impacts of colonization and ongoing health inequities. An [infographic](#) released by IHC following the RF noted an alarming drop in First Nations male life expectancy, which is now 18 years less than non-First Nations males and is similar to what we saw for Canadian life expectancy during the 1930s.

The Indigenous Health Committee also created a [resource guide](#) to help community physicians better understand the history and context behind the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. Feedback on the resource guide from Alberta physicians and those in other provinces has been positive and indicates a need for more resources to be developed and shared.

Looking ahead

Dr. Cara Bablitz, who has chaired the Indigenous Health Committee since 2019, recently completed her term and was instrumental in making the RF session a reality and in advancing several other important initiatives. As IHC looks ahead, it will carry on that work and continue to look for ways to help the AMA and its members reflect on how colonialism has shaped the current, unacceptable health reality facing so many Indigenous people.

IHC will also seek opportunities to assist the Canadian Medical Association, as the national voice of physicians, with its apology process, which was announced in June 2023 and seeks to address the harm that has been done to Indigenous Peoples by Canada's health care system. As [the CMA noted in their press release on the beginning of the apology process](#): "trust comes before reconciliation."

Listening and learning are the building blocks for trust. The Indigenous health session at the Fall 2023 Representative Forum helped create space to begin that important journey.

Recommended reading: [Alberta Doctors' Digest special issue on Indigenous health \(March - April, 2021\)](#)

Banner image: Dr. Nicole Cardinal, Saddle Lake First Nation (photo credit: Marvin Polis)