

Alberta Doctors' Digest

National Indigenous History Month

Each June offers a chance to recognize the enduring presence and influence of First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples in Canada. National Indigenous History Month invites reflection not only on history, but on the strength of living cultures, languages and traditions that continue to shape communities today.

For the Alberta Medical Association, this past June offered an opportunity to reaffirm our commitment to reconciliation and the principles outlined in the [AMA Policy Statement on Indigenous Health](#). Ongoing inequities in Indigenous health are linked to the lingering impacts of colonization that contribute to ongoing health disparities, including lower life expectancies. In Alberta, in [2023, the average life expectancy for First Nations in Alberta was 62.81 years](#), compared to Non-First Nations Albertans' life expectancy of 81.88 years – a 19-year gap.

Responding to those realities requires more than acknowledgment. It calls for sustained action, partnership and a health care system that respects Indigenous leadership, self-determination and culturally grounded approaches to healing.

Ceremony, health and cultural connection

The arrival of summer on June 21, which is also National Indigenous Peoples' Day, is especially significant in many Indigenous communities because it brings a season of gathering and renewal. On traditional territories across the province, people come together for powwows, feasts, songs, prayers and teachings that carry deep cultural and spiritual meaning.

The health benefits of cultural connection are increasingly recognized not just in communities, but in health research and medical practice. A strong sense of identity and belonging can help reduce isolation, support resilience and strengthen mental wellness. Time on the land can encourage movement, reflection and spiritual grounding. Language revitalization can reinforce identity and community cohesion. Ceremony can offer a framework for grief, gratitude, transition and recovery. For people carrying the impacts of trauma, racism or disconnection, these cultural anchors can be profoundly protective. They remind people that wellness is relational: it lives in connection to ancestors, family, community, place and purpose.

[A landmark study](#) conducted at the University of Alberta demonstrated that First Nations that have been better able to preserve their culture may be relatively protected from diabetes, and there is a growing body of evidence that demonstrates this powerful connection.

Dr. Esther Tailfeathers has long emphasized that Indigenous health cannot be understood apart from culture, community and the realities of colonization. A respected family physician from Kainai First Nation and the president of the Section of Indigenous Health at the AMA, Dr. Tailfeathers has helped advance culturally safe care and improve access to health services for Indigenous Peoples. In the context of ceremony season and National Indigenous History Month, she notes that, "Ceremony reconnects people to

who they are, where they come from and the relationships that sustain them. That connection is medicine in itself.” She notes that when health systems respect ceremony and make room for Indigenous ways of healing, they support care that is more humane, more effective and more aligned with what communities need.

Dr. Tailfeathers also underscores the importance of understanding ceremony not as an optional add-on, but as part of a holistic approach to wellness. “Ceremony can create space for prayer, reflection, accountability, forgiveness and hope,” she says. “It helps people feel seen, connected and supported, and those things have real impacts on health.”

Respecting ceremony can mean many practical things, from creating culturally safe spaces in care settings to supporting time for patients, families and staff to participate in important community and seasonal practices.

Participating in ceremony season as an ally

Ceremony season offers an opportunity for non-Indigenous Albertans to approach Indigenous events with curiosity, humility and respect. Throughout the summer, communities across the province host public celebrations, including:

- [City of Calgary – community-wide events in Calgary](#)
- [City of Edmonton —community-wide events in Edmonton](#)
- [Onion Lake Pow Wow — July 17–19, 2026, Onion Lake First Nation](#)
- [Kainai Pow Wow & Celebration — July 17–19, 2026, Standoff](#)
- [Tsuut’ina Nation Annual Celebrations Pow Wow — July 23–26, 2026, Redwood Meadows area](#)
- [Piikani Nation Celebration & Pow Wow — August 14–16, 2026, Brocket](#)

[Travel Alberta](#) also offers an excellent guide to summer events.

Showing up thoughtfully at these gatherings can deepen understanding and strengthen relationships. They offer a chance not only to appreciate the richness of Indigenous cultures, but also to recognize the responsibility that comes with reconciliation.

This year’s National Indigenous History Month unfolded amid difficult provincial and national conversations about Indigenous sovereignty, Indigenous health and human rights. Here in Alberta, First Nations communities took a stand on separatism, mounting successful legal challenges and protests that highlight their inherent rights and the constitutional status of the treaties.

In late May, [a CBC article](#) reported that an international panel, the Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal, found that Canada’s current policies constitute an ongoing genocide against Indigenous Peoples after hearings that examined intergenerational trauma, missing Indigenous children and unmarked graves associated with residential schools. The finding reinforces what survivors, families and advocates have been saying for years – the harms of colonial systems are not confined to history.

Dr. Cassandra Felske-Durksen, chair of the AMA’s Indigenous Health Committee, explains that “findings like these speak directly to the present-day conditions that shape Indigenous health, including mistrust, disrupted family connections and barriers to culturally safe care. They are not abstract historical concepts; they are our daily reality.”

There have also been important developments pointing toward change. On June 8, the [Canadian Medical Association applauded the passage of Bill S-228](#), legislation intended to protect informed patient consent in sterilization procedures. The CMA linked its support for the bill to its reconciliation commitments and to the profession's acknowledgement of harms, including forced and coerced sterilization of Indigenous women.

Dr. Felske-Durksen says the legislation is significant because consent, dignity and bodily autonomy are foundational to safe care. "Protecting informed consent is essential to rebuilding trust and addressing barriers to care."

Together, these developments underscore why Indigenous health must remain a national priority – one that confronts historic and ongoing harms while making space for culture, community and Indigenous-led healing to thrive.

As National Indigenous History Month came to a close, the call was both to celebrate and to act. Celebration, ceremony and connection to culture are not peripheral to health – they are vital expressions of identity, belonging and healing that deserve to be protected and respected.

Banner image credit: Sarah Zieminek