

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Is newer always better?

Do you remember the (not so) good old days of dial-up Internet access? Maybe your first cell phone or the first time you played Tetris on your mobile device? I remember when I got my first Motorola Razr cell phone after seeing on TV how it sliced between closing doors of a subway; needless to say, I was stoked. Shortly after, I got my first smartphone: the iPhone. This was followed by iPhone 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 (throw in a S here and there), and here we are at iPhoneX. Now the next one is launching before we have really had time to appreciate the newness of the last one.

As a Western culture, we are drawn to shiny and new. Now, I'm all for technological advancement and innovation (I am a millennial), and I am aware this is a drastic example, but – is newer always better? Go with me on this one.

Over the past three years, I have had the privilege to work in social development with Indigenous communities in Canada, primarily in the area surrounding Calgary and in northeastern BC. I remember the first time I was invited onto a reserve; my intention was to fix. I came with a good heart but the wrong approach.

After being invited into the community hall, fed delicious bannock and soup, and ending the day literally keeled over from laughing so hard, I realized that I had it all wrong. Yes, there are needs. Yes, there are challenges. But first and foremost, people are people, and they have a desire to be heard, valued and listened to. So instead, I changed my approach. I sat with elders and in ceremonies and sharing circles. I learned what a smudge was and why it was so sacred. Over the past three years, I have experienced a warm and rich culture that has so graciously extended a hand of hospitality and welcomed me into their homes and families. I have seen far too many ignorant perspectives that usually stem from a lack of awareness or education. I have been wrong many more times than I have been right. And most importantly, I have learned that asking questions is more important than having answers.

Perhaps our questions need to change from “What new thing can we try to incorporate into Indigenous health?” to “What can we learn from the past, and how can we bridge the gap between tradition and innovation to best meet the needs and goals of Indigenous peoples?”

I have also had a small glimpse into the struggles faced in Indigenous health care, specifically those in communities with substantial separation from major urban centres. It was quite a shocking experience to realize that there are places in Canada where people still do not have access to clean water. Or that calling an ambulance sometimes means a minimum of a 75-minute wait time, unless you are able to drive out and meet them halfway. Or witnessing a 19-year pregnant girl who in her third trimester had to check into a hotel 1.5 hours away and live away from family, friends and the comfort of her home for the remainder of her pregnancy.

If you're reading this, then perhaps this isn't news to you, as it was to me. There are real challenges that need real solutions. However, through all these realizations and my time in these communities, I have learned that it is sometimes easy to provide solutions for questions that aren't actually asked. That perhaps we need to change the types of questions we are asking.

Which brings me back to the original question. What if better doesn't always have to mean new?

In a world that presents updates, upgrades, faster, smaller, bigger, maybe newer isn't always better. In so many of my conversations with community elders and knowledge keepers, the value of tradition and traditional medicine is sacred. It is of high value to many communities to return to the ways of their ancestors and to incorporate tradition into every part of their way of living, culture, language, health and well-being. To view health holistically, to see mental, physical, emotional and spiritual balance as markers for health.

So perhaps our questions need to change from "What new thing can we try to incorporate into Indigenous health?" to "What can we learn from the past, and how can we bridge the gap between tradition and innovation to best meet the needs and goals of Indigenous peoples?" How can we, understanding and recognizing cultural differences, create solutions that have both parties on the same side of the table to create mutually beneficial outcomes for all involved? In a time when we are having more conversations about mental health, let us continue to assume less and build conversations more.

Whether I was playing baseball with youth or sitting in a sharing circle with elders, I learned the value of true cross-cultural collaboration. With a common goal and through conversations, we can understand and honor the richness of tradition and culture. Together, can we seek to understand more than we are understood? I hope in my future opportunities and pursuit of practicing medicine that this will be my starting point. Questions first. Listening next. Rinse. Repeat.

Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action

#22 We call upon those who can effect change within the Canadian health-care system to recognize the value of Aboriginal healing practices and use them in the treatment of Aboriginal patients in collaboration with Aboriginal healers and Elders where requested by Aboriginal patients.

Editor's note: Jessica Cooper is not yet a medical student, but she hopes to be one day. In the meantime, her experience as a young leader working with Indigenous communities has given her some insight that we thought warranted sharing. We hope you enjoyed her guest column.

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