

Alberta Doctors' Digest

AMA Indigenous Cultural Safety Training

Over three days in early January, AMA staff participated in Indigenous Cultural Safety Training, organized by AMA Professional Affairs.

After the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada](#) released its 2015 report addressing the history and legacy of residential schools in Canada, the AMA formed a working group to examine the seven health-related [Calls to Action](#) included in the report and to identify ways that the AMA could support education and change.

The result was the development of the [AMA Policy Statement on Indigenous Health](#) and the [Indigenous Health Committee](#) (IHC), which was formed to develop and promote the recommendations in the policy statement. The AMA's development of the Indigenous Cultural Safety Training program arose specifically from Call to Action #23, which states:

“We call on all levels of government to:

- (i) Increase the number of Indigenous professionals working in the health care field.
- (ii) Ensure the retention of Indigenous health care providers in Indigenous communities.
- (iii) Provide cultural competency training for all health care professionals.”



Blue Quills Boarding School, Saddle Lake, Alberta (Photo credit: Canada. Dept. of Interior/Library and Archives Canada/PA-046123)

Difficult learnings

In this thought-provoking and emotional all-day cultural safety training session, led by Brenda Reynolds,* an Indigenous Cultural Consultant of Saulteaux heritage, AMA staff were shocked and dismayed to learn of the “[aggressive assimilation policy](#)” and “[cultural genocide](#)” that resulted in [Indian residential schools in Canada](#). In addition to educating staff on the historical facts of Indian residential schools, Ms Reynolds helped staff understand the demeaning and negligent Indigenous experience of Indian hospitals and the subsequent consequences on Indigenous health.

Knowledge and introspection

The opening of minds and hearts to the lessons and learnings of the day began with a [smudging ceremony](#) and prayer offered by co-facilitator, Mrs. Phyllis Mustus,** a member of the Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation, accompanied by acknowledgment of our presence on [Treaty land](#).

Describing the training, Ms Reynolds said, “The objective (was) to recognize and increase knowledge, enhance self-awareness and examine any perceived biases and stereotypes of Indigenous people, while promoting positive relationships between service providers and Indigenous people.”

The training included viewing of the May Productions video, [In the Walls of His Mind](#), featuring residential school survivor Stephen Kakfwi – former Chief of the Dene Nation, premier of NWT and tireless worker for his community – as he described his predominantly horrifying experiences in residential school, and its pernicious effect on him. Playing in the background through the video is the touching song, “In the walls and halls of your mind,” written by Stephen.

In an especially poignant excerpt from video, Stephen said: “My parents didn’t raise me. I was basically gone just about all of my life. I came back when I was 18 ... You become a stranger to your own land; to your own community; to your own family ... Many Canadians don’t know. They think, ‘Why are these Aboriginal people always complaining? Why are they always on skid row? Why are they always drinking?’ We have to make amends ... We deserve to be happy. We should be able to enjoy the sun and the beautiful things around us without being caught all the time in the anger and the darkness and the horrible things that we went through as kids in residential school ...”

In addition to providing staff with a sobering overview of the tragic, multi-generational legacy of Indian residential schools, Ms Reynolds and Mrs. Mustus educated AMA staff about the history of [Indian Hospitals](#), describing the effect and influence that the Canadian government’s assimilation and colonialism policies had, and continues to have, on the social determinants of health for Canada’s Indigenous peoples.

The staff experience

Concluding with a [Sharing Circle](#), participants reflected on the day and considered how the knowledge they gathered would affect and change their lives, perceptions, beliefs and behaviors. Following are staff comments from a post-training survey:

“I will continue to pray for world peace and that humankind learns we are all one; that we can embrace any differences we have and that we can share them.”

“Challenge my own assumptions and biases ...”

“Be better able to discuss with others the impact of residential schools ...”

“Pay more attention to my own biases – consider changing some of my opinions.”

“I will speak up about what I learned today.”

“Less passive tolerance of misinformation, racism and stereotyping ...”

“Empowered to advocate ...”

“It has changed my attitude toward Indigenous Peoples.”

“Canada has issues; it’s my responsibility to make a difference.”

Training: next steps

While the initial focus of the Cultural Safety Training has been on AMA staff, “the Indigenous Health Committee is focused on making Indigenous Cultural Safety Training available to all our members,” explains Dr. Lyle Mittelsteadt, Assistant Executive Director, Professional Affairs.

“Right now, the committee is doing a scan to determine what is currently available in terms of Indigenous cultural training,” says Dr. Mittelsteadt. “Once we get an understanding of our options and develop a plan, we’ll communicate with members.”

Planning is also currently underway to provide Indigenous Cultural Safety Training to the remainder of staff who have yet to take the training, and the remaining members of the AMA Board of Directors and Senior Management Team, who haven’t yet been able to participate in a training session.

Biographies: training facilitators

*Brenda Reynolds, BSW, RSW, Master of Arts Counseling Psychology

Brenda Reynolds, whose Indigenous heritage is Saulteaux, has a Bachelor of Indian Social Work and a Masters in Counselling Psychology. Her early experience as a social worker, working with students at Gordon’s Indian Residential school, led to the first litigated case of sexual abuse involving an Indian Residential School staff member in Saskatchewan and Canada. The Gordon’s experience was the beginning of a rewarding career working with Indian residential school survivors and the impacts of Indian Residential Schools.

Brenda was lead Alberta Regional Coordinator for the Indian Residential School Resolution Health Support program and was the liaison for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and Health Canada, Ottawa. She developed the initial program for Health Support Workers who provided support to former Indian Residential School survivors, their families and Canadians as they participated in the Indian Residential School

Settlement Agreement. Brenda provided seven years of program training and management to the Health Support workers in Alberta.

Brenda was the 1992 Social Worker of the Year in Alberta, presented by the Alberta Foster Parent Association. The award recognizes commitment to the child from a professional and community practice perspective.

In addition to her extensive consulting work, training and numerous speaking engagements, Brenda is an avid distance runner, having successfully completed 24 marathons, including the Boston Marathon.

****Phyllis Mustus, Cultural Support Worker**

Phyllis is a member of the Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation. She has been married to Howard Mustus Sr. for 52 years. She recently retired from Alexis Nakota Sioux Nation after 40 years of service in various capacities: accounting and health departments. Phyllis and her husband provide and mentor community members with traditional ceremonies.

Related links and resources

“Cultural genocide”

From a [Globe & Mail article](#) (updated May 15, 2018), by Sean Fine:

Supreme Court Chief Justice Beverley McLachlin says Canada attempted to commit "cultural genocide" against aboriginal peoples, in what she calls the worst stain on Canada's human-rights record.

"The most glaring blemish on the Canadian historic record relates to our treatment of the First Nations that lived here at the time of colonization," Chief Justice McLachlin said. She was delivering the fourth annual Pluralism Lecture of the Global Centre for Pluralism, founded in 2006 by the Aga Khan, spiritual leader of Ismaili Muslims, and the federal government.

After an initial period of inter-reliance and equality, she said Canada developed an "ethos of exclusion and cultural annihilation."

From [CBC News, The National](#) (April 26, 2013):

Residential schools engaged in "cultural genocide," former prime minister Paul Martin said Friday at the hearings of the federal Truth and Reconciliation Commission, adding that aboriginal Canadians must now be offered the best educational system.

"Let us understand that what happened at the residential schools was the use of education for cultural genocide, and that the fact of the matter is – yes it was. Call a spade a spade," Martin said to cheers from the audience at the Montreal hearings.

From CBC News (March 8, 2019)

[‘There was a heaviness’: Alberta anthropologists locate unmarked graves of residential schoolchildren](#)

Kisha Supernant, an Edmonton-based anthropologist, is among a small team of researchers using radio-wave technology to locate the unmarked graves of children who died at a residential school in east-central Saskatchewan.

[Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement](#)

[Giant Indigenous Peoples Atlas floor map will change the way you see Canada](#)

January 21, 2019 | cbc.ca

Canadian Geographic has created a giant floor map, and an accompanying Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada, to change the way kids and adults look at this country.

Alberta Health Services: Diverse Populations

As part of their [Diverse Populations](#) online program, Alberta Health Services offers a course – [Understanding Diversity: Online Training](#) – for health care providers. Per the description, “This online course looks at providing patient-centred care to Alberta’s socially and culturally diverse population that may impact access, health and well-being of individuals and their families.”

In addition to the online course, Diverse Populations includes a list of Indigenous health- and culture-related resources, along with several other Indigenous (and newcomer) reference sources (Strategies and Frameworks; Tools; Nutrition; and Research). AHS is developing other Indigenous-focused educational tools/programs for both AHS- and non-AHS health care providers.

Banner photo: All Saints Indian Residential School, Lac La Ronge, Saskatchewan.
Credit: Geological Survey of Canada collection/Library and Archives Canada/PA-045174