



**BC NURSES'  
UNION**

*Standing up for health care*

## POSITION STATEMENT



# INDIGENOUS HEALTH

[www.bcnu.org](http://www.bcnu.org)

# BC NURSES' UNION BELIEVES THAT:

- > First Nations, Inuit and Métis people experience enormous social, economic, political and cultural challenges stemming from the legacies of colonialism, racialization and a political process that has failed to meet their needs. As a consequence, the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples is profoundly compromised.
- > Supporting Indigenous nurses by promoting the development and practice of Indigenous Health Nursing will also improve the health of Indigenous peoples of BC.

## BACKGROUND

In Canada the term Indigenous encompasses First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people. Canada's 2006 Census indicated that there were 196,070 self-identified Indigenous people in BC, with 46% under the age of 25.<sup>4</sup> The table below represents the Indigenous population in five BC Provincial health authorities.<sup>5</sup>

Health Authority	Total Population 2006	Indigenous Population 2006
Fraser	1,501,683	38,105
Interior	710,834	44,900
Northern	289,793	48,050
Vancouver Coastal	1,077,572	24,470
Vancouver Island	740,373	40,550
<b>Total BC</b>	<b>4,320,255</b>	<b>196,070</b>

In 2006, the National Indigenous population was growing six times faster than that of the general population and shows no signs of slowing down.<sup>6</sup>

The gap between Indigenous and Non Indigenous Health status has been well documented for decades.<sup>7</sup> Indigenous people have experienced enormous social, economic, political and cultural injustice for generations. As a consequence of these systemic inequalities, the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples has been, and continues to be, profoundly compromised.

### Canada's Indigenous people have:

- > Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for their own health and well-being and that of their community.
- > Addressing health inequalities for Indigenous peoples is not merely a matter of funding more health care resources but ensuring that the social determinants of health (such as housing, education, food and water security) are provided for.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the delivery of health care and the provision of the key social determinants of health should be undertaken in a way that is respectful of the cultural needs of Indigenous peoples.
- > The Indigenous way of life incorporates a holistic approach to health that reflects physical, spiritual, emotional and mental dimensions and is 'not merely the absence of disease'.<sup>2</sup>
- > Nurses play a crucial role in improving the health status of Indigenous peoples of BC both through the delivery of culturally appropriate health care and the development and promotion of quality health services.
- > Individual nurses in all domains of nursing practice are responsible and accountable for acquiring and incorporating cultural competencies in their relationships with Indigenous people and co-workers.<sup>3</sup>
- > As an organization we must support members to acquire cultural competencies.
- > Advocating for self-governance and empowering Indigenous peoples, including Indigenous nurses, will improve the status of their health.

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- > An infant mortality rate 2.5 times that of the general population.
- > A male life expectancy of 7.4 years, and female life expectancy of 5.2 years less than their non-Indigenous counterparts.
- > An adult diabetes rate four times the Canadian average, with 90% of those reporting adverse consequences such as vision problems, decreased kidney function, and cardio vascular problems.
- > A disproportionate burden of infectious diseases with twenty times tuberculosis rates, five times hepatitis A, and seven times Chlamydia rates.<sup>8</sup>

In 2006/07 while two out of five non-Indigenous adults reported a personal annual income of \$40,000 or more, a similar proportion of Métis, and more than half of First Nations and Inuit adults reported incomes of less than \$20,000.<sup>9</sup>

In 2012 the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food was “disconcerted by the deep and severe food insecurity faced by Indigenous peoples living both on- and off-reserve in remote and urban areas.” He reported rates of food insecurity among off-reserve Indigenous households as three times higher than among non-Indigenous households.<sup>10</sup>

Indigenous people currently account for 21.5% of Correctional Services of Canada’s inmate population; even more concerning is that in 2010-11, Indigenous women made up over 31.9% of all federally incarcerated women, representing an increase of 85.7% over the last decade. Within corrections, Indigenous people have “more health problems, including Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder and mental health issues and addiction.” Despite numerous task forces and commissions, including the Royal Commission on Indigenous People, which concluded in 1995 that “the justice system has failed Indigenous peoples” most recommendations remain unimplemented. A 2012 report for the Office of the Correctional Investigator, found “limited understanding and awareness within CSC of Indigenous peoples’, cultures, spirituality and approaches to healing.”<sup>11</sup>

In 2010, Indian and Northern affairs Canada reported that between 2001 and 2006 there was little or no progress in the community well-being of First Nations communities.<sup>12</sup>

## ASSUMING RESPONSIBILITY - BC FIRST NATIONS HEALTH AUTHORITY

Challenging the status quo, BC’s First Nations initiated a tripartite agreement with the provincial and federal governments resulting in the creation of the BC First Nations Health Authority (FNHA) which assumed control from Health Canada. This process reinforces BC First Nations’ aim to take greater control of their health at the individual, family, and community levels. The FNHA can build and deliver health care solutions by leveraging current systems and integrating a number of traditional and holistic paths to wellness.<sup>13</sup>

## NURSES TAKING ACTION

In December 2012, the Health Council of Canada released a report “*Empathy, dignity, and respect: Creating cultural safety for Indigenous people in urban health care.*” Health care providers, managers, and researchers found that one of the barriers to good health lies squarely in the lap of the health care system itself. They reported that many Indigenous people don’t trust—and therefore don’t use—mainstream health care services because they don’t feel safe from stereotyping and racism, and because the Western approach to health care can feel alienating and intimidating.

### The report called on front-line staff and health practitioners to:

- > “Be a champion for cultural competency and cultural safety.
- > Work to enhance your own cultural competency, a process that requires ongoing self-reflection, lifelong readiness to learn, and a willingness to change.
- > Engage with patients, clients, and colleagues in ways that are respectful and caring, that acknowledge and affirm their distinct cultural identities, and that support the development of trust and mutually empowered relationships.
- > Provide patient-centred care that meets patient-identified needs.
- > Look for and create opportunities for partnership and collaboration that will

enhance cultural safety for First Nations, Inuit and Métis people.”<sup>14</sup>

The Native and Inuit Nurses Association of BC (NINABC) was commissioned by the First Nations Health Authority to create a strategic plan for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous nurses working in BC's First Nations communities. NINABC collaborated with the BCNU Indigenous Leadership Circle (ILC) and others on this project. *“Future Directions for Indigenous Nursing in British Columbia”*<sup>15</sup> was created and the following key objectives were presented to the FNHA staff:

- > Develop and maintain a registry of nurses of Indigenous ancestry in British Columbia.
- > Provide a student mentorship program and collaborate with schools of nursing in BC to develop and endorse Indigenous Health curricula.
- > Ensure that the FNHA creates a health human resources strategic plan focusing on recruitment and retention.
- > Ensure that BC Indigenous nurses are given the opportunity and recognition as a political voice for improved health outcomes for Indigenous peoples.

### BCNU'S INDIGENOUS LEADERSHIP CIRCLE

Recognizing that it is important that Indigenous nurses are provided opportunities to have a voice in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous health organizations and governance structures, BCNU supported the formation of the Indigenous Leadership Circle in 2005. ILC members have participated in both provincial and national organizations that contribute to advancing Indigenous health status outcomes. Since its inception, the ILC and the BCNU Human Rights and Equity

Committee have been a determined voice for Indigenous nurses.

### HOW CAN NURSES HELP?

Indigenous ways of knowing thrive on connection and relationships. The best way to impact the health status of Indigenous patients is to ensure you practice in a culturally safe and competent manner. BC nurses have a significant role to play in changing the health status of BC Indigenous peoples. In many institutions, it is a nurse who is the first contact and in many BC First Nation communities a nurse may be the only access to health care. It is essential that nurses have a strong foundational knowledge of Indigenous Health in the context of colonialism, social determinants of health, and current policies and legislation that directly affect the health of Indigenous peoples. There are many resources available and the best way to help is to get informed and build your skill set of cultural competencies.

The Provincial Health Services Authority has created an on-line Indigenous Cultural Competency (ICC) training program that is free of charge to any nurse who works within a provincial health authority.<sup>16</sup> This ICC training is a unique, facilitated on-line training program designed to increase knowledge, enhance self-awareness, and strengthen the skills of those who work both directly and indirectly with Indigenous people.

Every BC Health Authority has an Indigenous Health Strategic plan in place to support the new First Nations Health Authority and Indigenous people of BC. Find out what role your workplace has in Indigenous health care issues and supporting the new FNHA.

Search out and read the documents contained in this Position Statement's reference list.

### CONCLUSION

The need to support cultural competency and safety is based, in part, on the experiences of many Indigenous people with the mainstream health care system. Often these experiences have been negative due to cultural differences. Frequently, cultural differences and the inability of health providers to appropriately address these differences have contributed to high rates of noncompliance, reluctance to visit mainstream health facilities even when service is needed, and feelings of fear, disrespect and alienation. Nurses' interaction can literally change health outcomes and the future of Indigenous peoples. Support for the BCNU internal Human Rights and Equity infrastructure and inclusion and engagement with BCNU Indigenous members through regional meetings, social media, and personal contact will all help bridge the gap and contribute to reconciliation that will benefit Indigenous peoples.

As a society we have known for generations that Canada's Indigenous peoples are the sickest people in the country due to unnecessary inequities. As nurses and trusted health care providers, we must take the opportunity to change the status quo for a healthier Indigenous population. As a union, we will champion cultural competency and safety by supporting on-going education and raising awareness, both with our members and external partners, of issues vital to the health and well-being of Indigenous peoples.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

Please contact your BCNU Regional Chair to discuss these issues. Go to [www.bcnu.org](http://www.bcnu.org) or look in your **Update** magazine for a list of representatives.