

Indigenous Perspectives and Communicable Disease Control, Protecting the Rights of All Peoples¹

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Key Messages

- The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated, yet again, the impacts of colonization and the imbalances that have resulted from disconnection from the land. Reconnecting and focusing on our relationships with our environments and animals are needed to work towards balance.
- Future generations should be at the center of our work in transforming health and in recovery plans for COVID-19 and planetary health.
- Indigenous knowledges and worldviews, guided by the wisdom of the Elders, provide important insights into how to relearn how restore health, and wellness.

Introduction

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, constant learning has occurred at every level of society; from understanding the SARS-CoV-2 virus, to the implementation of never before seen public health regulations, and our gradual adaptation towards a new 'normal'. Long-lasting inequities magnified during this pandemic, as well as the ongoing climate change crisis (which also impacts our health) have fostered questioning about how our social structures and values have contributed to these crises. Additionally, this time has allowed for the coming together of different perspectives to work towards solutions.

Dr. Daniele Behn-Smith is Eh Cho Dene (Fort Nelson First Nation) & French Canadian/ Metis (Red River Valley) and the current B.C. Deputy Provincial Health Officer with Indigenous Health, BC. During one of the sessions of the webinars originally titled "Learning for Planetary Health: Early Lessons from a Pandemic", she shared that this was a time of 'relearning' in regard to our surroundings and structures on human and planetary health. This profound insight inspired the renaming of the ongoing webinar series "Learning and Relearning for Planetary Health: Early Lessons from a Pandemic". This opportunity to 'relearn' from Indigenous perspectives, which carry a deep understanding of health and wellness in balance with nature, will be essential in our bounce forward to a better 'normal'. In the eleventh session of the series, Dr. Daniele Behn-Smith and Dr. Shannon Waters (who is a Medical Health Officer for Island Health and member of the Stz'uminus First Nation) shared insights on Indigenous knowledge and teachings.

¹ On June 24th 2020, a webinar with the above title, was presented as a contribution to a series on "*Learning and Relearning for Planetary Health*", which spoke on Indigenous perspectives and ways of knowing and being. The presenters were Dr. Daniele Behn-Smith who is Eh Cho Dene (Fort Nelson First Nation) & French Canadian/ Metis (Red River Valley) and the current B.C. Deputy Provincial Health Officer with Indigenous Health, BC, and Dr. Shannon Waters who is a member of Stz'uminus First Nation and the Medical Health Officer with Island Health. All the recordings of this webinar series can be accessed here: <https://learningforplaneta.wixsite.com/website/past-webinars>.

Intersection between Indigenous and Western Worldviews

The differing concepts of health and wellbeing can be very apparent between Western and Indigenous worldviews as Western biomedical views tend to “purposefully decontextualize knowledge in pursuit for generalizable truths” (Smylie, 2011). In contrast, Indigenous perspectives and teachings on health and wellness focus on “balance, gratitude, humility, respect, ceremony, and food as medicine”. These teachings are in guidance from Elders and Mother Nature, as they hold knowledge on “how to restore balance, health, wellness, and the realigning with natural laws” (Behn-Smith, 2020) which are of essence in our relearning.

Colonization impacted the sophisticated Indigenous systems on health and healthcare developed with surrounding ecosystems. These Indigenous systems, as well as ways of knowing and being, became suppressed and outlawed, causing significant negative impacts on the health of Indigenous peoples (Smylie, 2004; Behn-Smith, 2020). A decolonizing perspective invites Western and Indigenous worldviews to come to an intersection to bring together the best parts of each distinct way of knowing and being. This coming together makes relearning possible and can lead to powerful interconnections for teaching and the sharing of knowledge (Behn-Smith, 2020).

The First Nations Population-Health and Wellness Agenda, developed through collaborations between the Chief Medical Officer at the First Nations Health Authority and the Provincial Health Officer at the Ministry of Health, is an example of the bridging of Indigenous and Western ways of knowing (FNHA, 2020). This work aims to uncover what First Nations need to be healthy, self-determining, and vibrant, and revealed the importance of connections and relationships (First Nations Health Authority, 2020; Behn-Smith, 2020). The image included in Figure 1, depicts a “vision of healthy, self-determining, and vibrant BC First Nations children, families and communities” (Behn-Smith, 2020) and portrays the “deep roots of wellness that make First Nations uniquely [themselves]: self-determination, language, communities, Nations, and culture, [which] are needed in abundance for people and communities to be healthy, vibrant, and well” (Behn-Smith, 2020). This image also incorporates Western systems which must be interacted with, so that they will be “supportive, culturally safe, and free of racism and discrimination, to adequately nourish these determinants of health” (Behn-Smith, 2020).

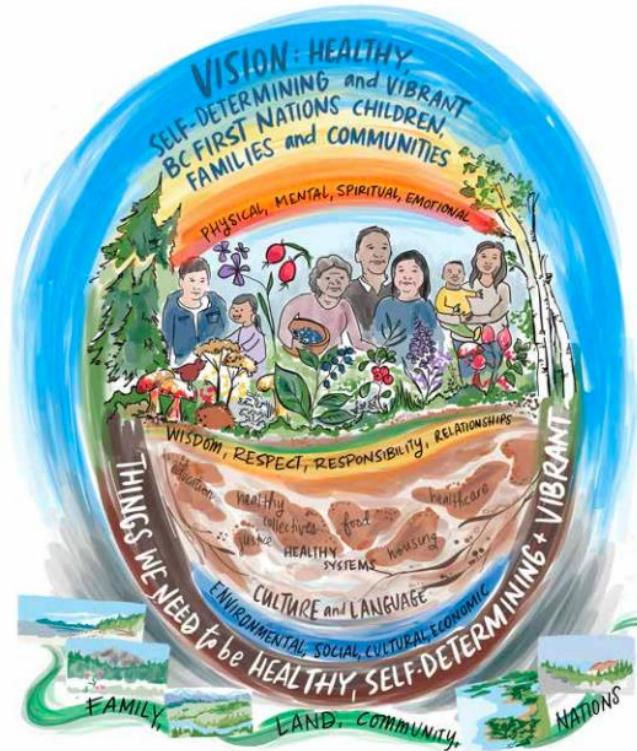


Figure 1: First Nations Health Authority - First Nations Population-Health and Wellness Agenda: Summary of Findings (2020)
“Vision: Healthy, Self-Determining, and Vibrant BC First Nations Children, Families and Communities”

Relationships and Interconnections

Currently, slowing the spread of COVID-19 through communicable disease control models has been the highest priority. From an Indigenous perspective, “control” is not spoken nor focused on, but rather, there is more emphasis on “relationships” (Waters, 2020). Indigenous models on ‘communicable disease control’ are centered around being in a relationship with surrounding environments. If an imbalance were to occur, (as we are experiencing in both the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change emergency), it is our responsibility to reconnect with our environments to restore balance (Waters, 2020). While there is a need for communicable disease control during these times, there is also a need to “move into ‘relationality’ and changing our worldviews into how our relationships work with the environment and others” (Waters, 2020). Indigenous peoples have powerful worldviews that see humans and components of the environment, such as animals, and other people as groups that are on equal footing. The process of ‘relearning’ would mean to forge reconnections with these groups (Waters, 2020).

Relearning towards transformative health

Imbalances can cause events such as pandemics to occur when opportunities are made for people to be left out, oppressed, and marginalized (Waters, 2020). “Illnesses, diseases, and pandemics should not be scorned, but embraced as gifts from the Creator that signal to us that things are out of balance and need attending to” (Behn-Smith, 2020). We have seen many magnified pre-existing inequities during the COVID-19 pandemic which speak to these imbalances, such as the negative impacts of overcrowded neighbourhoods and social exclusion from health and justice systems (Behn-Smith, 2020). In response, there has been increased

cross-sectoral collaboration at a provincial level, as different BC ministries have come together during this time (Behn-Smith, 2020).

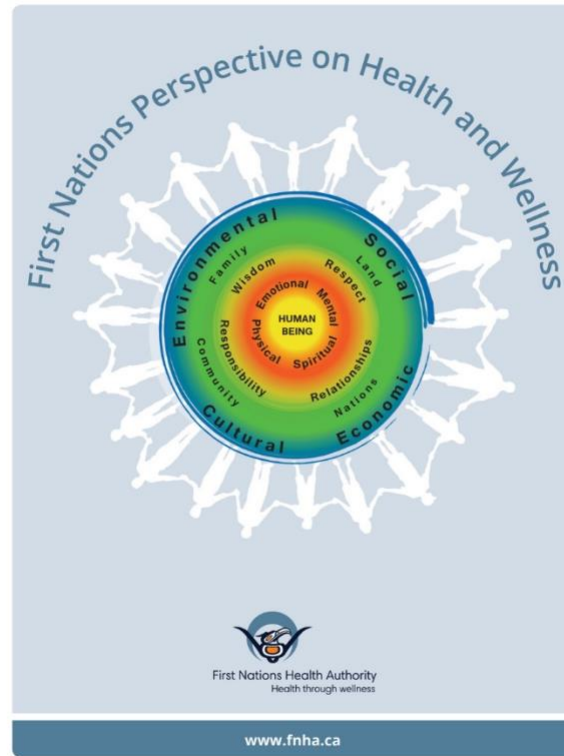


Figure 2: First Nations Health Authority – First Nations Perspectives on Health and Wellness

The First Nations Perspective on Wellness shown in Figure 2 showcases a gradient of colors to depict the importance of the interconnections between several determinants which surround the center of human beings (FNHA, 2020b; Waters, 2020). As we move forward towards transforming our health, we must consider that “transforming health for all means to allow each person to be the best human beings they can be” (Elder Leonard George, Waters, 2020). This requires us to continue ‘relearning’ on restoring balance on existing inequities by forging and reconnecting our relationships with humans, our environment, and our planet for future generations as we develop recovery plans for COVID-19 and climate change to ‘bounce forward and not back’ into a better and improved normal for all to thrive and be the best they can be (Waters, 2020; Behn-Smith, 2020).

References

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