

relationships ceremony gathering finding spirit body elders healing together gifts sharing building natural medicines strengthening knowledge stories healthy teachings people many mind voice

Traditional Healers' Gathering

?i ct yət'at'ək'w (We are going home)*



we are going home

Traditional Healers' Gathering: We Are Going Home

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“Ceremony”

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge the following people and organizations who made this Traditional Healers Gathering possible at the First Nation House of Learning on October 12-13, 2011: The Musqueam Nation for hosting the gathering on their traditional territory, the First Nations Health Society (FNHS) and Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH) for supporting the gathering and the Provincial Health Services Authority for hosting the dinner event. We would also like to thank the following for their support and dedication to making this a successful event and for future events to come: the Traditional Healers Planning Committee (Tonya Gomes, Jean Allbeury, Dr. Georgia Kyba, Dr. Lee Brown, Gerry Oleman, Jeri Sparrow, Larry Grant, Alannah Young Leon (PHD Can), Janice Wardrop, Rupert Richardson, and Francine Burning), the Institute of Aboriginal Health, Esemku Health & Wellness Centre and Salishan Catering. Special thanks to Robert Nahanee, Dr. Richard Vedan, Dr. Lee Brown, Alannah Young Leon (PhD Can) and all of the helpers for providing the ceremonies during the Gathering. Lastly, a very warm thank you to all the keynote speakers and guest panelists – your contributions helped make this Gathering a great success.



“Sharing Knowledge”

?i ct vət'at'ək'w

Holistic medicine is a practice that focuses on the whole patient, and addresses the social, emotional and spiritual needs of a patient as well as their physical treatment.

The World Health Organization defines being healthy as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.



The Traditional Healers Gathering was attended by 131 people, which included 68 traditional healers and knowledge keepers from across BC.

Introduction

On October 12-13, 2011, the Traditional Healers Gathering was proudly hosted on Musqueam Traditional territory and was held at the First Nations House of Learning. The interim First Nations Health Authority (iFNHA) and Aboriginal Health-Vancouver Coastal Health, made this Gathering possible.

This Traditional Healers Gathering was attended by 131 people, which included 68 traditional healers and knowledge keepers from across BC. This Gathering was intended to bring together BC First Nation traditional healers and traditional healing program leads to share their knowledge and provide a space for comments and suggestions on how to support traditional healers in their work and in the communities.

The long-term goals of this Gathering are to develop strategies on how to incorporate traditional healing practices into programs, communities and health systems, therefore ultimately supporting traditional healing practices and making it more accessible to community members. This Gathering endeavored to draw upon the wisdom and experience of the participants to nurture tradition, culture, and holistic wellbeing in our current health systems.

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“If you stay humble, you will go a long way spiritually. Each time you utilize your gift, you make your spiritual selves a little stronger. You don’t get your full strength when you start, you have to prove your spirit – that is being humble”

Isadore Tom Jr.

Purpose

The purpose of the Traditional Healers Gathering was to provide a space for First Nations Healing Practitioners to meet and strategize on the following long-term goals:

- **Develop protocols/guidelines on traditional healing practices that are available to all communities;**
- **Increase awareness and acknowledgement of traditional healing practices in communities, with health care practitioners and on the government level;**
- **Develop strategies on how to incorporate traditional healing practices into programs, communities and health systems (to make them more accessible to community members);**
- **Form an advisory committee of traditional healing practitioners.**

Background

BC First Nations have expressed the importance of integrating traditional healing practices into their current health systems. The FNHS has been undertaking work in response to this need. Within 2011, this work included the report 'Models of Traditional Wellness in Canada, US & Internationally', the formation of the Traditional Wellness Working Group and cohosting of the Traditional Healers Gathering.

The planning for the Traditional Healers Gathering started in the summer of 2010, with a partnership between the FNHS and Aboriginal Health-VCH. This planning began after years of engagement on traditional healing practices with BC First Nation Communities at numerous gatherings and after a 'Traditional Models of Wellness in British Columbia Environmental Scan' was complete. Communities expressed their interest and the need for traditional healing practitioners to be acknowledged and to work in an integrated manner with the current medical system. Out of these conversations many ideas were suggested, one being the necessity of a Gathering for traditional healers. This Gathering was proposed to strategize on how to incorporate traditional healing practices within communities in BC and to learn how to best support traditional healing practitioners.



?i ct vət'at'ək'w

Traditional medicine refers to the knowledge, skills and practices based on the theories, beliefs and experiences indigenous to different cultures, used in the maintenance of health and in the prevention, diagnosis, improvement or treatment of physical and mental illness.

Traditional medicine covers a wide variety of therapies and practices which vary from country to country and region to region.

Process

The process of planning this Gathering was integral in accomplishing a successful event that was based in traditional protocols and led by the communities. In early 2011, a call (see Appendix A) was put out to BC First Nation Traditional Healers and supporting communities to ask if there was an interest in a Healers Gathering and if so, what were the topics they saw as essential to speak about. There was an enormous response of interest and information on interested topics from people across BC.

Selecting a First Nations venue built with traditional awareness and capable of holding a large gathering with ceremonies helped determine the date and location and the UBC House of Learning was the final choice. As the venue was located on Musqueam traditional territory and had its own established protocols with Musqueam, the initial planning group followed those protocols in recruiting the first members of the planning committee: a Musqueam Elder and a Musqueam traditional healer, to help guide the committee in implementing the event.

A planning committee was then formed from Aboriginal community members including traditional healers, leaders in health care and students in Aboriginal studies. This committee had monthly/bimonthly meetings and continual email conversations for 7 months to compile information and make decisions on the Gathering. The committee determined protocols to follow, interviewed keynote speakers, selected on-site healers, reviewed topics, agenda items, registration, catering and drafted up focus group questions for the Gathering.

“Finding, Strengthening and Sharing Your Gifts”

The primary focus of the agenda was to include as much time as possible for traditional healer participation while providing background information on the purpose of the Gathering. The agenda took many months to establish to fit in the many knowledgeable, wise and informative speakers that were asked to participate. The agenda included opening sunrise ceremonies, welcomes, a traditional welcome to the land, a welcome from the Lieutenant Governor of BC Steven Point, an introduction to the House of Learning and a welcome from both the FNHS and VCH. Throughout both days on-site healers were available for the participants. Both days also included discussion circles, which provided a space for healers to share their input and knowledge (for the complete agenda see Appendix A).

The overall planning for the Gathering took a full year, with a lot of support from many individuals. Registration greatly exceeded the numbers of participants anticipated. The resulting goal, derived by the participants themselves, is to have future gatherings to further this work.

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Traditional Healers' Discussions

The premise of this Gathering was that First Nations healers and knowledge keepers carry the wisdom and experience to build First Nations health systems and to inform best practices in supporting First Nations people accessing multiple health systems. The Gathering itself was structured to share information by highlighting the work being done in the areas of traditional medicine initiatives; the involvement of traditional healers in various health systems; and the issues impacting traditional healers.

The agenda for the two days included: keynote speakers; presentations; focus group discussions; open space and cultural activities. It was felt that focus groups would provide opportunities for the greatest amount of input from the traditional healers.

An explicit intention of the Gathering was to collect information from the traditional healers on several aspects:

- **How they envisioned the work they were doing within various health systems;**
- **Did they want/require supports to help them in accessing health systems or working within current health systems;**
- **Did they see a need or have a desire to develop an advisory body of traditional healers to create awareness, ethical guidelines, and supports.**

It was acknowledged that the traditional healers needed to guide the conversations in ways they found useful. The planning committee drafted up a series of questions to provide a framework for some focus group discussions but also ensured that each discussion group had room to discuss issues they saw as essential.

“First Nations people have always had an incredible understanding of themselves, their health and their place in the world. Living wisely with good health is something we have always done, and we are often reaching back into our ancestral knowledge – our traditional ways of being and knowing – to reaffirm how we can live healthier lives today and tomorrow. The generation before us hardly interacted with the health care system – often only just near the end of life. If the entire health care system disappeared today, we would still be taking care of each other, and we are taking care of each other”

Dr. Evan Adams - Deputy Provincial Health Officer

In some countries, 80% of the population depend on traditional medicine for primary health care.

In many developed countries, 70% to 80% of the population has used some form of alternative or complementary medicine.

“Many Medicines, Many Teachings”

Day 1

Day 1 was focused on gaining the overall perspectives of traditional healers on the issues and solutions in achieving positive health outcomes and supporting the role of traditional healers in current health systems.

Day 1 questions included:

What is missing for the people that is creating ill health?
What's been working to create good health and healing?
What's needed to support traditional healers in a) community and b) health systems?

These broad questions served to spark discussion and create a firm foundation on which to extend the second stage (day 2) of the focus groups.

The long-term goals of this Gathering are to develop strategies on how to incorporate traditional healing practices into programs, communities and health systems, therefore ultimately supporting traditional healing practices and making it more accessible to community members.

“Gathering Together”

Day 2

This second day was meant to inquire if the practitioners saw a need or had a desire to develop an advisory body of traditional healers to create awareness, look at ethical guidelines, and build supports for First Nation traditional healers across BC. Each question in the second stage had several ‘thoughts to consider’ to help the process.

Day 2 focus group questions included:

What are the Roles of a Traditional Healers Advisory Committee? a) Who does it include? b) What does it look like? c) Name? d) Roles & Responsibilities?
How do you see future Gatherings?

The summary of these discussions has been broken down into themes and key points. The overall themes from both days include:

**Culture/Tradition; Healing; Loss; Education; Youth/Elders;
Knowledge transfer; Integration; Advocacy; Networking and Resources.**

BC First Nations are rewriting the way their health care is delivered and traditional healing will play a vital role in this new health system.

The traditional Aboriginal diet was based on wild game, shellfish, roots, berries and plants which are lower in fat and higher in nutrients than modern refined foods.

Plant and animal life were considered sacred and never wasted or taken unnecessarily.

The connection to family and community is an important element to traditional healing.

Themes and Key Points

The following key points are drawn from the comments of the participants of the focus groups. All of the actual comments can be found in Appendix B of this document.

“Building Relationships”

1.) What is missing for the people that is creating ill health?

Culture/Tradition

Knowledge/awareness of histories and culture, connection, family. Disconnect between urban and rural First Nations. Lost culture/identity/spirituality; Lack of respect for traditional knowledge and practices.

Loss

Lack of trust, unity; Lack of family values; Loss of trust and safety (in self and surroundings); Loss of laughter; Loss of leadership and teachings.

Knowledge

Loss of knowledge; loss of protocol; Teachings; Impact of residential schools; Truth of the history and its impact.

Resources

Basic needs not being met – food and shelter; Lack of medical safety – not understanding terminology; Lack of money for food – special diets are expensive; Lack of hunters and fishers; Loss of our traditional land.





“Common Vision”

2.) What’s been working to create good health and healing?

Culture/tradition

Practicing our ceremonies; Youth and Elder involvement; Traditional foods and gardens; Traditional medicines – teas, traditional plants and medicines for healing.

Education

For both Aboriginal communities and non-Aboriginal organizations; Bridging traditional and contemporary cultures; Medical practitioners are starting to listen.

Youth/Elders

Children with more knowledge; Better role models; Collaboration between youth and Elders; Elder wisdom; Adaptation not assimilation.

Resources

More Aboriginal specific resources: Language and culture programs; Traditional food; Treatment centers; Clinics.

Healing

Healing ourselves; Resolving issues; Better understanding; Spiritual awakening; Resilience; Responsibility.

Tradition:

1: An inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behaviour.

2: A belief or story or a body of beliefs or stories relating to the past that are commonly accepted as historical though not verifiable.

3: The handing down of information, beliefs, and customs by word of mouth or by example from one generation to another without written instruction.

4: Cultural continuity in social attitudes, customs, and institutions.

More than 500 drugs used in medical pharmacopia today were originally used by First Nations people.

First Nations have always known a high quality level of health includes physical, emotional, mental and spiritual wellness. These four equal parts are closely interconnected and each must be nourished and balanced for an individual to be healthy.

3) What's needed to support traditional healers in a) community and b) health systems?

Knowledge transfer

Increase awareness of healers, of traditional medicines, practices, and protocols; Medical systems to understand Aboriginal healing and knowledge.

Education

Cultural competency training for western systems.

Integration with Medical systems

Involvement of Elders/healers in hospitals; Policies supporting Aboriginal healing practices, initiatives, protocols, ceremonies, and protecting Aboriginal knowledge.

Advocacy

Support and help for the healers – gatherings, support from leadership/communities.

Networking

Screening of healers, network for healers.

Resources

Funding, cultural space, land, Aboriginal lodges.

“The Voice of the People”



“Natural Healing”

Day 2

1) What are the Roles of a Traditional Healers Advisory Committee?

A) Who does it include?

Elders, traditional healers, healer’s helper, professionals.

B) What does it look like?

Starting with intern committee; From different Nations; Each health region; Healthy individuals.

C) Committee Name Suggestions

Medicine Keepers Circle; Knowledge Keepers.

D) Roles & Responsibilities of Advisory Committee

Educate: Educate each other, communities, and youth on traditional knowledge and protocols in each region; Educate the complimentary nature of allopathic medicine and traditional medicine to the people.

Knowledge transfer: Protect ceremonies, environment and knowledge.

Integration with medical systems: Role in advising the health authorities; Relationship/partnership with other health professionals. Ensure cultural competency in the health care setting (hospitals, Aboriginal liaisons, front line workers, etc).

Culture and Tradition: Work with common vision and purpose; Support traditional ways.

Advocacy: Funding; Health of healers; Recognition of knowledge.

Networking: Develop database of healers; Communicate with other healers and health directors.

General Comments: Importance of healing self before healing others.

2) How do you see future Gatherings?

A) What does it look like?

Hold gathering at least once or possibly 4 times year; In different regions and Nations; An environment where healers can share and network.

B) Discussion topics to consider

Topics directed by community; Safety; Knowledge of medicines.

The Traditional Healers Gathering brought together the wisdom and experience of the participants to improve health and healing in First Nations by nurturing tradition, culture, and holistic wellbeing in our current health systems.

This gathering endeavored to draw upon the wisdom and experience of the participants to nurture tradition, culture, and holistic wellbeing in our current health systems.

In pre-contact times, First Nations were well-nourished and relatively free from high-mortality epidemic diseases.

Important factors in maintaining good health were the relatively small size of settlements, hygienic and physically active lifestyles, varied diets and a deep knowledge of natural medicines and holistic health practices.

Conclusion

The traditional healers felt the current issues that are affecting health and healing in First Nations people are the loss of culture and tradition; loss of identity and spirituality; lack of respect for traditional knowledge and practices; lack of family values; and lack of resources for basic needs such as food, housing, and water. However the healers did identify culture and tradition as creating health and healing in the people. They also identified that there is a bridging of traditional and contemporary cultures, more Aboriginal specific programs and healing of ourselves. The healers identified the following areas as necessary for how traditional healing can improve health and healing in First Nations people:

- **Increase awareness of healers, of traditional medicines, practices, and protocols;**
- **Education on traditional healing for the western systems;**
- **Integration with the medical systems;**
- **Advocacy for healers;**
- **Networking for healers;**
- **Support with resources.**



At the Gathering, the healers agreed the formation of a Traditional Healers Advisory Committee was important to develop. It was felt that this committee would help with the areas identified as necessary for the improved health and healing in First Nations. Future annual Gatherings were identified as necessary to carry on this work of sharing, networking and support among traditional healers.

In summary, the Traditional Healers Gathering was a success. Registration greatly exceeded numbers with widespread representation of healers from across BC. In total, 68 traditional healers were present at the Gathering. The Gathering was designed for sharing and gathering information on the issues that impact health and healing and how to improve the involvement of traditional healers in various medical systems.

The Gathering brought together the wisdom and experience of the participants to improve health and healing in First Nations by nurturing tradition, culture, and holistic wellbeing in our current health systems. The following recommendations stem from the many conversations and dialogue circles at the Gathering and are made to help advance this process.

Recommendations

- 1) **Form Traditional Healers Advisory Committee**
- 2) **Understand Roles and Responsibilities of Committee**
- 3) **Determine Membership**
- 4) **Establish Funding to Form and Operate Committee**

“Body-Mind-Spirit”

Committee Details

- Planning committee members from the Gathering initiate formation of Advisory Committee and consider criteria for establishing membership.
- Membership could include Elders, traditional healers and aides, health care professionals from different Nations, each health region, healthy individuals, representatives from the FNHS, VCH, Institute of Aboriginal Health and other interested organizations.
- Start with an interim committee.
- Educate each other, communities and youth on traditional knowledge and medicine, allopathic medicine and protocols in different regions.
- Protect ceremonies, environment and knowledge.
- Advise health authorities; build relationship/partnership with other health professionals; ensure cultural competency in health care setting.
- Work with common vision and purpose.
- Develop database of healers.
- Communicate with other healers and health directors.
- 2nd Annual Traditional Healers Gathering to be held after Advisory Committee is formed and within two years of the first Gathering.
- Annual Gatherings to be held at least once or possibly 4 times a year; in different regions and Nations.
- Topics directed by community; including: safety; knowledge of medicines.
- Open environment where healers can share knowledge, network and keep knowledge alive.

The healers identified culture and tradition as creating health and healing in the people. They also identified that there is a bridging of traditional and contemporary cultures, more Aboriginal specific programs and self-healing taking place.

The traditional healers felt the current issues that are affecting health and healing in the First Nations people are: Loss of culture, tradition, identity, and spirituality; lack of respect for traditional knowledge and practices; lack of family values; and lack of resources for basic needs such as food, housing, and water.

Gifts
Gathering
Teachings
Stories
Ceremony
Knowledge
Together Building
Relationships
Body Finding **Sharing**
Elders People Mind
Spirit
Medicines
Natural **MANY** Togetherness
Healthy
Strengthening