

## Why traditional healing has a place in modern health care



First Nations supporters outside the Brantford courthouse where Justice Gethin Edward of the Ontario Court ruled on Nov. 14, 2014, that a hospital cannot force a cancer-stricken 11-year-old to resume chemotherapy because the Constitution protects her mother's right to treat the child with traditional aboriginal medicine.

Glenn Lowson/The Globe and Mail

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I have an early childhood memory of my grandmother boiling water on a wood stove. A soft, cedar scent emanated from the pot. Grandma was coming down with a cold, so she was making a rust-coloured tea from a mix of leaves and branches she had gathered in the woods. The tea was going to help her feel better, help her get better.

This was one of my first experiences with traditional healing: the use of medicines found naturally to help heal. My grandparents were Ojibwa and they lived in a cabin on the north shore of Lake Superior. Although they had the means to get to town, they usually found what they needed from the forest and water around them.

First Nations knowledge is rooted in the sharing of such medicines, storytelling, ceremonies, crafts, ideologies and dances. This type of traditional knowledge has been passed down from generation to generation over hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

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So, is there a place for traditional healing in today's health-care system?

The answer is yes. As modern health care has evolved, we have increasingly recognized the relevance of different forms of medicine and healing that are steeped in culture and history. The World Health Organization has acknowledged the importance of traditional healing, and here at home we are beginning to see a new face of health care that includes thinking about and using what has been working in different cultures for thousands of years.

Some of our health-care organizations now incorporate traditional healing with conventional healing. The reality is that we can learn and take away good medicines from both streams and combine them into a plan that takes into consideration an individual's holistic health needs. This is patient-centred care.

Traditional healing involves working with a person to help them heal, not just physically but mentally, emotionally and spiritually. Also known as holistic healing, it involves an integrative approach that seeks to balance the body, mind and spirit with the environment. Traditional healing makes use of the healing properties of many medicines found in and on the land and water to help people suffering from physical ailments, along with healing ceremonies to help people with their mental, emotional and spiritual ailments. It's this combination that promotes holistic wellness.

Many of the medicines found in plants, trees, herbs, soils and water that are used in First Nations healing have counterparts on conventional pharmacy shelves. These traditional or natural medicines are used to combat cold, flu, joint pain, gastrointestinal ailments, headache, insomnia, infection, skin conditions, blood diseases, cancer and many other illnesses. As with any medicine, a traditional healer recommends a specific dosage, preparation and administration.

The best health outcomes occur when there is an opportunity to be treated through a comprehensive health-care plan that includes both traditional and conventional practices. A story was once shared with me about a patient receiving both conventional and traditional treatment for cancerous tumours. The traditional healer had given her traditional medicines to take with the understanding that she continue with conventional treatment. When a checkup showed that the tumours had shrunk to indiscernible sizes, the patient informed her doctor about receiving medicines from a traditional healer. The doctor told her to continue, because what she was doing was working. (Optimally, though, both healers would be informed of each other's treatment plan from the start.) This story resonated – not only did the patient find both medicines helpful, both the healers had an openness and respect for the other's discipline.

When we find this type of mutual respect, it only serves to provide the best health outcomes for any patient.

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It's also important to consider and respect a patient's belief in a particular discipline, otherwise we risk insulting and turning them away from conventional medical options, with potentially life-threatening consequences.

The cultural aspects of healing are also critical. Where medicines help to heal the physical body, ceremonies help to heal the mind and spirit. Traditional healing understands that there are four areas that make up the person: body, mind, emotions and spirit. Wellness occurs when one achieves balance in these four areas; conversely, sickness occurs when there is imbalance.

First Nations people have a natural connection with the land and much of their healing comes from this connection, particularly during the sweat lodge ceremony. The sweat lodge is representative of the womb of Mother Earth, and the significance of returning to the land can be spiritually rejuvenating.

Sweat lodge ceremonies are always led by a traditional healer who guides the ceremony, leads prayers and songs that reflect the purpose of that particular sweat and ensures that everyone in the lodge is safe. (Among the other ceremonies conducted in the sweat lodge are naming ceremonies, where a person receives his or her traditional name. Mine is Penasi Gabo – Thunderbird Standing.) Many First Nations teachings centre on the harmonious connections among the self, each other and the land. The ability to maintain harmony through these relationships promotes healing and wellness within oneself, the family and community.

As we learn more about the holistic benefits of traditional medicines and ceremonies, and become more advanced in conventional medicines and practices, we gain a deeper level of respect and understanding for each discipline and acknowledge the importance of recognizing their co-existence in a modern health-care system.

Spending summers with my grandparents in my youth taught me many things, but most importantly it taught me the importance of respecting what Mother Earth has to offer. It taught me that most things we need, not just to survive but to thrive, are there for us – food for the table, clean water to drink, medicines to heal and a never-ending supply of peace, if we choose to use it. Today I work in a hospital setting. Not only do I see the potential of bringing traditional and conventional ideologies together in the context of healing, I also see the necessity.

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