CULTURAL SAFETY - PART OF A SYSTEM-WIDE RESPONSE TO WIDESPREAD RACISM

"Unacceptable – but unfortunately not uncommon." That was the response of Colleen Erickson, chair of the board of the First Nations Heath Authority in B.C. when allegations came to light in June about racist behaviour in some BC emergency departments.

The reports that staff in some emergency rooms were playing a "game" to guess the blood-alcohol level of Indigenous patients are just some of the most recent indications that discrimination against Indigenous people continues to occur throughout the health care system. These experiences can include instances when health concerns are discounted, assumptions are made, someone is blamed or belittled, or cultural health practices are disrespected.

This issue and the health disparities they've created are the main reason the FNHA was established almost seven years ago. A key goal of the first Indigenous health authority in Canada is to promote a culturally safe health care system that is free of racism and discrimination.

"Such a system is one where people – all people – have a right to voice their perspectives, ask questions, and be respected by health care professionals for their beliefs, behaviours and values," said Richard Jock, the interim CEO of the FNHA.

Cultural safety is an outcome of cultural humility, a term the FNHA defines as "a lifelong process of self-reflection to understand personal and systemic biases and develop relationships based on mutual trust."

Jock said the organization is working to 'hardwire' cultural safety and humility into the health system through partnerships at local, regional, provincial and federal levels.

Some of those partnerships are formalized through declarations of commitment to cultural safety and humility. For example, in 2017, all 23 health regulators in B.C. (there are now 21 due to mergers) signed declarations of commitment, making BC health professionals the first in Canada to pledge to make the health system more culturally safe for First Nations and Indigenous people.

Cultural safety is reflected at program levels as well. The way health benefits used to be managed for First Nations people led to frustrations among both health providers and clients (the term the FNHA uses rather than "patients").

"When we choose glasses, the optician directs us towards the 'Indian Affairs' glasses, which are ugly. It is an embarrassing experience and it makes us want to walk out of the store," said a participant in one of the focus groups the FNHA held last year when it was planning to assume responsibility from the federal government for administering health benefits for vision services, dental care, medical supplies and equipment, and drugs not covered by PharmaCare. Approximately 144,000 First Nations people in BC receive these benefits.

The migration off the Health Canada system in September, 2019 involved a review and re-design of the delivery of non-insured health benefits to improve coverage and make the system more efficient and effective. Benefits are now delivered on behalf of the FNHA by Pacific Blue Cross.

"Since the transition from NHIB [Non-Insured Health Benefits] to FNHA and Pacific Blue Cross, all of my First Nations customers are getting much better service – faster approvals and a higher rate of approvals. We are very happy with PBC," reported an optician from LensCrafters in the Fraser Salish region.

Clients report much greater satisfaction with the new system as well. However, the racism investigation currently underway in B.C. is a reminder that there is a long way to go to embed cultural safety throughout the health system. It's also important to note that health providers need to be aware that clients may be affected by experiences that are not readily evident. Consider this poignant statement from a benefits focus group participant last year:

"I was beat in the head so often in Indian Residential School that every time I'm in a dark room or can't see now, I get triggered and feel terrified that someone is going to attack me again. That is why when I lost my glasses, I lived in constant fear until I had coverage for new ones."

Resources

San'yas offers online cultural safety training for health care providers in B.C., Manitoba and Ontario. Facilitators guide participants through the history and experiences of Indigenous people to teach self-awareness and ensure the delivery of culturally safe care. The Indigenous Cultural Safety Collaborative Learning Series offers self-guided webinars focused on Indigenous cultural safety across all sectors. San'yas training meets the accreditation criteria of The College of Optometrists of British Columbia for eight hours of Public Health (Ocular Health).