

## **Through the Eyes of Reflection: Helping Nursing Students understand the role of culture & its impact on Health. A Clinical Immersion Model**

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### **Introduction**

In late 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) released a report that was the culmination of a lengthy investigation into the way in which First Peoples in Canada have been treated by European settlers and the legacy of residential schools, colonialization, and discrimination. From this report, 94 Calls to Action were delineated highlighting ways in which Canada could respond to the findings in the report. For our purposes, number 57 asks that all federal, provincial, territorial, and municipal governments provide education [to public servants] on the history of Aboriginal peoples through intercultural competency, antiracism, conflict resolution, and human rights. This article describes the efforts of nursing faculty to prepare nursing students to be culturally safe practitioners by using a clinical immersion program that immerses students not only into the health center but also into the culture and ceremonies to better understand the role of culture and its impact on the health of one Indigenous community.

The University of New Brunswick (UNB), Canada's oldest English language university, has responded to the TRC Call to Action by working to indigenize and decolonize the programs, policies, spaces, and services offered on both the Fredericton and Saint John campuses. To that end, the authors are involved in

guiding nursing students to gain a better, more robust understanding of the effects that colonization, residential schools, the 60s sweep, and discrimination have had on Aboriginal people. The Faculty of Nursing at UNB has been very intentional in including elements of cultural diversity and Indigenous health and the need to better understand the Indigenous experiences in order to provide the best and most culturally respectful and appropriate care. In the third year of the program nursing students take Community and Population Health, a theory class which is paired with a community clinical practicum. The purpose of the theory course is to focus on the role of the nurse in the community and public health nursing, using the population health framework. The course addresses principles of community assessment and development, program planning, and other strategies that are supported through a population health perspective, with emphasis on populations, and social, political and economic determinants of health. Nursing students are expected to develop an understanding of the role and scope of practice of the community health nurse. Based on the principles of primary health care, caring, and social justice, UNB's Faculty of Nursing has built course outcomes that focus on five core components: knowledge and its application, communication, critical thinking and skills of analysis, professional identity, and social justice and effective citizenship. Throughout the course outcomes, numerous references can be found that guide students to demonstrate skills that include cultural competence along with a deeper understanding of the role that the determinants of health play in the lives of vulnerable populations. The goal of the immersion model is to allow students to experience first hand through Indigenous ways of knowing experiential learning, such as storytelling, pictures and visiting with Elders, a true understanding of culture.

## **The Model**

The model itself is based on the TRC's calls to action and a collaborative partnership approach. Students were asked to participate in many activities (conferences, powwow, red shawl campaign) and ceremonies (smudges, sweat lodge, making of drum and medicine bag) while working at the community's health centre, school, and also partnering with other Indigenous departments such as the Mikmaq-Wolastoquey Centre. Students were asked to apply the social determinants of health with an emphasis on the Indigenous determinants. They were asked to apply the theory of the Population Health model while vetting it through the Web of Being - the parallel Indigenous model.

### **Red Shawl Campaign**

One good example of an experience the students participated in was the Red Shawl Campaign for Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women. The students were asked to partner with the Mikmaq-Wolastoquey Centre. This opportunity for the students was the very pinnacle in helping to get the students working and thinking through a community lens as it was one of the first exposures to Indigenous culture in which they were active participants. The students volunteered to be the 'Keeper of the



Shawls,' which meant that they would be present while the display was open to the public. In preparation for this experience, the students had to learn about the history of colonization and the legacy of the residential schools. In the words of one student "*There is so much that I have learned about the history of colonization and residential schools that I should have already known as a Canadian.*" Students felt that by listening to the Elders speak, watching a series of videos and reading the life stories of the over 1200 missing women, their worldview changed:

*"I believe that my experience in this First Nations community is one that will influence my nursing practice forever. I am lucky to be one of the few students who has had the opportunity to experience this rich culture. I have been able to reflect on my own practice and spirituality and have really had my eyes opened to the biases and stereotypes that society places on cultures and how important it is to educate yourself first-hand" (Third-year student).*

The volunteer experience gave students the opportunity to engage in conversation with families of murdered and missing women, to speak and listen to the stories of the many people who came to be with the shawls. It also gave them a chance to use art to express their thoughts through the development of posters to be used on the walk during the last day of the event. This opportunity and the experiential learning that occurred was so diverse for the students - whether this was acquired through the smudging ceremony, making a traditional craft with middle school students or the candlelight vigil with our Elder in Residence - each experience helped the student to fully immerse and get a deeper understanding of the issues facing Indigenous women.

The experience also helped to engage the students in an open dialogue about what it means to become an Indigenous ally. Using the Ally Bill of Responsibilities by Dr. Lynn Gehl ([http://www.lynngehl.com/uploads/5/0/0/4/5004954/ally\\_bill\\_of\\_responsibilities\\_poster.pdf](http://www.lynngehl.com/uploads/5/0/0/4/5004954/ally_bill_of_responsibilities_poster.pdf)), students were able to see how reflecting on and thinking about their own privilege and biases could affect their ability to provide safe care and enter into a genuine helping relationship.



## Conclusion

The goal of this immersion model is to allow students to experience first-hand, through Indigenous ways of knowing and experiential learning (such as storytelling, and visiting with Elders), a true beginning understanding of culture and its impact on the health of an individual, community or nation. Through collaborative partnerships with our local Indigenous community, we were able to do just that. The Red Shawl Campaign was just one of many robust clinical experiences during this rotation that provided students with the opportunity to engage and work within an Indigenous community. By immersing them in a community with many opportunities, we provided a life-changing experience that students feel will impact their nursing career forever.

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