Peace Is Essential Prerequisite of Health: Linkage in Canadian Indigenous Peoples

Recently I completed teaching a 12-week course on Peace through Health for Canadian undergraduate students. During the course they had been moved by the lives of children in Gulu, Northern Uganda, had considered medicine and peace actions in Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Croatia, El Salvador, and more. Their final examination was intended to bring them right back home to the invisible conflict under our noses in Canada. The exam paper began with this scenario:

You are part of a health team working in a rural area. In this area, 95% of inhabitants are indigenous people. They are a minority in most of the country and have been so since it was settled by Europeans in the 17th century. For the indigenous people, the next three centuries were a history of violence, expropriation of land, and attempted extinction of culture through a residential school system. The health of this population is much worse than in the majority population, measured by all indicators. Their housing, water system, sanitation, and school infrastructure are all substandard compared to the rest of the population. Unemployment is high. A nearby mining development employs very few of these people, although the land was expropriated from them with an agreement for employment opportunities.

Recently, a nonviolent land claims demonstration elicited a massive police response in which two indigenous people were shot dead.

You are aware, from the youth who come to your clinic, that there is serious unhappiness and hopelessness among them and an attraction to guns and violence. Accident, homicide, and suicide rates are very high among youth.

The students were then asked to identify the health deficits and the peace deficits. They had then to generate ideas for health sector action on both health and peace. They had to work out the intellectual and ethical foundations of an intervention and how to evaluate it.

Interestingly, while most students realized we were talking about Canada in this scenario, there was a proportion that imagined we were discussing a problem in a far away country! The scenario does indeed generalize to other indigenous populations. However, it is easier to see a speck of dirt on another’s shirt than the big, ugly stain on one’s own.

Peace deficits

For 12 000 years Canada has been the site of many thriving populations of Aboriginal peoples with
complex cultures and inter-relations. The economies of these communities and their cultures were tightly interwoven with the land and its intact ecosystems. From the 17th century, a project of European colonization proceeded to take over land and resources from those who are now called Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people were displaced on to smaller and smaller areas of land, culminating in reserves – areas generally too small for economic purposes. This process has not ended. As I write, several hundred Aboriginals are encamped on a site about 30 km away, protesting a commercial housing development on land that is theirs by a treaty arrangement from 1841.

The process of displacing Aboriginal people from their land occurred alongside several other destructive processes. Racism, the attitude that one people and its culture are inferior to others, has meant that Aboriginal people have been subjected to unfair treatment and denigration of their identity in many arenas. The practice of taking Aboriginal children from their families and placing them in residential schools was a deliberate attempt to extinguish aboriginal cultures. Children were punished for speaking their native languages. While their Aboriginal identities and cultures were abused, large numbers of these children in residential schools also suffered physical and sexual abuse.

Young people reared away from family life in seriously abusive environments were gravely emotionally and socially damaged, and impaired in rearing the subsequent generations of Aboriginal children. Although the residential school system ended in 1980s, it will take many generations before the damaging effects attenuate. The government of Canada and the several churches involved in these profoundly destructive practices have made moves to acknowledge and apologize for the damage and to offer compensation, although the latter has yet to be realized.

The destruction of aboriginal economies left many Aboriginal people dependent on government support. Aboriginal people have often failed to benefit from natural resource development on the tiny proportion of land remaining under their jurisdiction. Even when access to employment has been promised in treaties that cede land for resource development, such promises are often broken and many Aboriginals remain unemployed. The fact that a significant proportion of Aboriginal people have little economic role in society and depend on “welfare” has added to the devaluation of Aboriginal identity by the dominant society, and sometimes by Aboriginals themselves.

Their efforts to claim their rights are often met with police violence, occasionally lethal violence, although Aboriginal people almost always use nonviolent methods of protest, such as occupying land they claim as theirs, or blockading roads to prevent timber removal.

This conflict is highly salient in the minds of many Aboriginal people, barely acknowledged in the dominant culture.

**Health deficits**

In 2002, the United Nations Quality of Life Index ranked Canada as one of the top five countries in the world. However, the native reserve conditions in Canada were described as deplorable (1). The life expectancy of Aboriginal persons is on average 7 years less than Canadians overall (2). Rates of illness related to nutrition, such as diabetes and obesity, are very high among Aboriginals (3), as well as tuberculosis, almost unknown in other Canadians (4). Rates of alcoholism, drug addiction, fetal alcohol syndrome, child abuse, woman abuse, and children in substitute care are all higher than for other Canadians (3). HIV/AIDS is decreasing among other Canadians, while increasing among Aboriginal people (5).

**Peace-health connection**

Some of the linkage between peace deficits and health deficits runs through poverty. About half of Aboriginal people live in conditions of poverty (6).
Housing is particularly problematic on reserves, with severe overcrowding being common (3). Many reserves have polluted water supplies and inadequate sanitation. In urban centers, Aboriginal people face a far higher probability than others of being homeless (7) and their education levels are below those of the rest of the population (3).

Some of the linkage may be assumed to run through demoralization, loss of valued identity, and hopelessness about the future. These factors are likely to be especially important in explaining the shocking levels of youth suicide among Aboriginals, many times more frequent than among non-Aboriginal youth (8). It is clear then that peace deficits in a society are bad for population health. In this case, displacement from land has meant disintegration of economies and culture. Poverty, dependence, and loss of identity have followed. Deliberate attempts by the dominant society to obliterate the Aboriginal cultures, accompanied by racism have magnified the damage. Forced deprivation of family life, physical and sexual abuse, and devaluation of native identity in residential schools have seriously impaired the mental and emotional health of many Aboriginal people. The knowledge that current Aboriginal people bear is of having over 400 years of unredressed injustice and devaluation behind them. Such burdens can be hard to bear. Besides that knowledge, individual lives are likely to include multiple adverse circumstances of loss, abuse, frustration, illness, and injury.

Canada’s Aboriginal people show very clearly the health effects of structural violence – the loss of life potential caused by social institutions that oppress, discriminate, and exploit.

Potential for action from the health sector

There are many in the health sector who are dedicated to dealing with aspects of Aboriginal health issues – better nutrition and education for diabetics, prevention programs for HIV/AIDS, treatment programs for substance abuse, and so on. A “peace through health” analysis would suggest that for Aboriginals to gain equal health status with other Canadians, the very long-standing peace deficits must be addressed. Repairing the lack of peace between Aboriginal people and other Canadians will be a necessary condition for health. This will mean that treaty rights, so often broken, must be observed. Broken promises must be kept and land must be restored to Aboriginal people. The task of the health worker then becomes advocacy of the necessary conditions for health.

Land is fundamental as a condition for Aboriginal people’s health. The assumption of superiority of the dominant culture can be called sharply into question, as Canada, alongside other developed countries, destroys its own environment and the biosphere in pursuit of its highest value – economic growth. For three centuries, warning voices from the Aboriginal people have been ignored. The health, indeed the survival of humankind, requires that we learn from Aboriginal wisdom about living in peace with all other species (9).

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Health workers, for the sake of the health of Aboriginals, those in the dominant culture, all on the planet, need to promote that role for Aboriginal people. The proposition of this paper is that it is not enough to work at the front lines in Aboriginal health. Policy work on the peace deficits is essential.
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References


