

About Health Canada

Indian Health Policy 1979

The Federal Indian Health policy is based on the special relationship of the Indian people to the Federal Government, a relationship which both the Indian people and the Government are committed to preserving. It recognizes the circumstances under which many Indian communities exist, which have placed Indian people at a grave disadvantage compared to most other Canadians in terms of health, as in other ways.

Policy for federal programs for Indian people, (of which the health policy is an aspect), flows from constitutional and statutory provisions, treaties and customary practice. It also flows from the commitment of Indian people to preserve and enhance their culture and traditions. It recognizes the intolerable conditions of poverty and community decline which affect many Indians, and seeks a framework in which Indian communities can remedy these conditions. The Federal Government recognizes its legal and traditional responsibilities to Indians, and seeks to promote the ability of Indian communities to pursue their aspirations within the framework of Canadian institutions.

The Federal Government's Indian Health Policy reflects these features in its approach to programs for Indian people. The over-riding concern from which the policy stems is the intolerably low level of health of many Indian people, who exist under conditions rooted in poverty and community decline. The Federal Government realizes that only Indian communities themselves can change these root causes and that to do so will require the wholehearted support of the larger Canadian community.

Hence, the goal of Federal Indian Health Policy is to achieve an increasing level of health in Indian communities, generated and maintained by the Indian communities themselves.

This increasing level of health in Indian communities must be built on three pillars. The first, and most significant, is community development, both socio-economic development and cultural and spiritual development, to remove the conditions of poverty and apathy which prevent the members of the community from achieving a state of physical, mental and social well-being.

The second pillar is the traditional relationship of the Indian people to the Federal Government, in which the Federal Government serves as advocate of the interests of Indian communities to the larger Canadian society and its institutions, and promotes the capacity of Indian communities to achieve their aspirations. This relationship must be strengthened by opening up communication with the Indian people and by encouraging their greater involvement in the planning, budgeting and delivery of health programs.

The third pillar is the Canadian health system. This system is one of specialized and interrelated elements, which may be the responsibility of Federal, Provincial or Municipal Governments, Indian bands, or the private sector. But these divisions are superficial in the light of the health system as a whole. The most significant federal roles in this interdependent system are in public health activities on reserves, health promotion, and the detection and mitigation of hazards to health in the environment. The most significant Provincial and private roles are in the diagnosis and treatment of acute and chronic disease and in the rehabilitation of the sick. Indian communities have a significant role to play in health promotion, and in the adaptation of health services delivery to the specific needs of their community. Of course, this does not exhaust the many complexities of the system. The Federal Government is committed to maintaining an active role in the Canadian health system as it affects Indians. It is committed to promoting the capacity of Indian communities to play an active, more positive role in the health system and in decisions affecting their health.

These three pillars of community development, the traditional relationship of the Indian people to the Federal Government, and the interrelated Canadian health system provide the means to end the tragedy of Indian ill-health in Canada.

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