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The impact of colonization on the health of Indigenous people in Canada
Statement of Acknowledgement of Territory

I would like to acknowledging that the land on which we gather is the traditional territory of the Beothuk and Mi’kmaq peoples.
Dedication

Kalvin (Oziigizhiigweb) Ottertail, 1957-2017
Indigenous people of Canada

- The original people of Turtle Island and their descendants
- Section 35(1) of the Canadian Constitution refers to “aboriginal people”
  - First Nations (approx. 850,000); 51% live off Reserve; 25% are non-Status Indians
  - Inuit (approx. 60,000)
  - Métis (approx. 500,000)
  - TOTAL 1.4 M (roughly 4.3% of the Canadian population, 2011 census data)
- These are not just ethnic terms, but *actual nations in the full legal sense of the word*
  - only a nation can sign a treaty with another nation
- 634 individual First Nations, 65 different languages in 11 major groups, vast social and cultural differences between groups
- *Not all Indigenous people have signed treaties, ceded territory, live on reserves, or are governed by the Indian Act*
The system favors the Settlers

- The main social determinants of health are: income, education, employment, social status, poverty, societal stratification, and social support networks.

- In a colonial society, the social determinants of health are designed to favor the Settlers at the expense of the Indigenous population.

My grandfather started a business in St. Vital, MB, transporting milk from local farmers to a central dairy. He had a grade 8 education, but died a millionaire.

My father graduated from the University of Toronto and started a generic drug company. If he had been a Status Indian he would have had to give up his Status.
The health gap in Canada (today)

• **Indigenous people have a disproportionately high burden of disease, and systemic factors are responsible for at least a third of this burden**

• **Settlers in Canada have a quality of life that is 6th in the world; First Nations = 63rd**

• **First Nations**
  - Life expectancy differential: 8 yrs for males, 5 yrs for females; infant mortality: 1.75x higher
  - Youth suicide rate: 5-6x higher; tuberculosis rate 26x higher
  - Lifetime risk of severe trauma 4-8x higher, accounting for 1/3 of deaths
  - HIV rate among First Nations in northern Saskatchewan is at third world levels
  - 75% of urban First Nations live on <$20,000/yr

• **Inuit**
  - Life expectancy differential: 15 yrs less; infant mortality: 4x higher in some communities
  - Youth suicide rate: 11x higher; tuberculosis rate: 185x higher
  - *In Nunavut, 70% of preschoolers experience food insecurity*

• **Métis**
  - Life expectancy differential: 4 yrs
A third world in our own backyard

- Indigenous people are the fastest growing, poorest, and most marginalized segment of Canada’s population
  - Prescription narcotic abuse rate (Oxycontin) ~70% in remote reserves
  - Fetal alcohol syndrome, fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)
  - Attachment disorders, poor parenting, chronic stress, anger, self-harm
  - Diabetes, renal disease, amputations at an early age
  - *Indigenous people make up 25% of the federal prison population*
  - *Today, there are more First Nations kids in the child welfare system than at the height of the residential schools (especially in Manitoba)*
    - 3.6% of Indigenous children vs. 0.3% of non-Indigenous children are in foster care
    - Almost half of children age 14 and under in foster care are Indigenous

- *The economic cost of not fixing the problem is staggering*, yet 50% of the DIAND $8.24B budget stays in Ottawa
Historical health of Indigenous people

- Plains First Nations were among the tallest people in the world
- Abraham Maslow studied the Blackfoot community in 1938
  - More emotionally secure than 90% of Settler control group
- Physical and emotional health are the birthright of every Indigenous person
- Diseases that were introduced to Turtle Island after 1492: chicken pox, cholera, diphtheria, influenza, malaria, measles, scarlet fever, smallpox, typhoid, typhus, whooping cough, and the common cold
  - 75-100% mortality rates in most Indigenous communities
  - The Holocaust: 66% mortality rate among European Jewry
- Diseases that crossed the Atlantic from west to east: Chagas disease, syphilis, yaws
Pre-Columbian era

- ~1000 AD, Leif Erikson visited l’Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland
- He found *Vitis riparia* (hence the name, Vínland)
- Met some Skrælingar
- Stayed a while, then headed back to Iceland
There were people living on Turtle Island.
They were self-governing and economically self-sufficient.
They did not live in a Hobbesian ‘state of nature’
  i.e., lives that are “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”
The political organization of the Hodinohso:ni was so sophisticated, it eventually influenced the U.S. Constitution (see Senate Resolution 331 from the 100th Congress, October 5th, 1988).
The Hodinohso:ni Great Law of Peace is the foundation for the oldest representative democracy in the world.
  These ideas crossed the Atlantic from west to east: Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité have Haudenosaunee roots via the American Revolution.
The word ‘corn’ appears 236 times in the King James Version (1604-11), even though there was no corn in the Middle East during the time of Christ.
“When we saw so many cities and villages built in the water and other great towns on dry land we were amazed and said that it was like the enchantments... on account of the great towers and cues and buildings rising from the water, and all built of masonry. And some of our soldiers even asked whether the things that we saw were not a dream?” – Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *The Conquest of New Spain*
1613

- The Guswenta: a peace and friendship treaty between the Hodinohso:ni and the Dutch, negotiated in the Finger Lakes region, Upstate NY
- Represented by the *Two Row Wampum*
  - Two purple lines: Indigenous canoe and Settler ship (each representing their respective communities), travelling the river of life together, neither touching nor interfering with each other
  - Three white lines: the principles of peace, friendship, and respect/forever
- Applicable today to *all* of Turtle Island, including those parts that have still not entered into formal treaties (i.e., most of British Columbia)
1710

- Four Indigenous leaders (3 Mohawk, 1 Algonkian) visited the court of Queen Anne, in London
- They were received as “Four Indian Kings” (*Nation to Nation relationship*), and their portraits were painted by the Dutch painter, Jan Verelst
- In 2010, Canada Post issued a series of commemorative stamps
1763

• The Seven Years War was concluded by The Treaty of Paris
  • France surrendered its North American territories except for St. Pierre and Miquelon; regained possession of Guadeloupe from Britain in exchange for Canada
  • Chief Pontiac, a former ally of the French, attacked British forts (Pontiac’s Rebellion) for fear of British reprisals, this prompted King George III to issue

• The Royal Proclamation of 1763
  • Incumbent upon “several Nations or Tribes of Indians” and the British Crown
  • Key concept: *Aboriginal Title* has existed, continues to exist, and can only be surrendered to the Crown through the Treaty process
  • Still applicable in Canada (Section 25 of the Canadian Constitution Act of 1982), but not in the United States (due to the American Revolution)
  • A totally different approach than the one later used by Great Britain in Australia or British Columbia (which were both regarded as *terra nullius*)
Red: territory where Aboriginal Title has been extinguished, and where colonists may settle freely

Pink: territory where Aboriginal Title still exists (and can only be surrendered to the Crown), and where colonists may not settle
What is an Indian Treaty?

- An agreement between two nations
  - Peace and friendship treaties set out ethical standards of conduct (e.g., Two Row Wampum, Silver Covenant Chain, Dish with One Spoon)
  - Formal treaties involve consideration: the surrender of Aboriginal Title in exchange for something, e.g., an annuity, clothing, farm implements, a medicine chest, a usufruct, etc.

- Ownership of land is an alien concept for Indigenous people
  - You can’t own Mother Earth
  - Humanity’s role is one of stewardship rather than resource extraction
  - What was recognized in 1763 was eventually taken away through the formal treaty process, notwithstanding the principles of peace and friendship agreed upon in 1613
1790

• Birth of the Métis nation in the Red River Settlement
  • Assimilation can be a two-way street
    • First Nations women assimilated European DNA from French and Scottish husbands
    • Their children were raised as Roman Catholics
    • They spoke a mish-mash of Indigenous and European languages called Michif
    • They hunted buffalo using horses and guns
    • They played music on European instruments
  • A unique and highly resilient people
    • But they were not specifically mentioned in the Royal Proclamation of 1763
1829

- Shanawdithit, the last full-blooded Beothuk, dies of TB
- Mi’kmaq and Innu are present in Newfoundland
- There are Innu and Inuit communities in Labrador
- Newfoundland and Labrador remain anomalies
  - Not *terra nullius*
  - No peace and friend treaties
  - No formal treaties
  - Never officially ceded or surrendered to the Crown
1830

• Relocation (ethnic cleansing) of Anishinaabe, Odawa, and Potawatomi people from southern Ontario to Manitoulin Island to make room for British settlers

• *First Indian Residential School* (The Mohawk Institute; aka The Mush Hole) in Brantford, ON
1867

- The U.S. purchased Alaska from Russia in June, 1867, and Sir John A Macdonald became concerned about American expansionism
  - He obsessed about building a transcontinental railroad close to the U.S. border to connect B.C. to the east
- The Hudson’s Bay Company controlled Rupert’s Land (3.9 million km²) by means of a royal charter (dating from 1670)
- Canada agreed to pay £300,000 to the HBC to compensate them for the loss of their charter, with the Crown acting as agent for the transaction
  - *Louis Riel resisted this change of ‘ownership’ because he believed that Canada (unlike the HBC) would not respect Métis land rights*
- Great Britain delayed the sale of Rupert’s land until issues with the Métis were settled
New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Canada are united in a federal state, the Dominion of Canada, by the British North America Act (July 1, 1867). The province of Canada is divided into Ontario and Quebec. The United States of America proclaims the purchase of Alaska from Russia (June 20).
1869-70

- Louis Riel led the **Red River Rebellion**
  - Canada’s first national crisis
  - Ottawa sent in troops by small boat along the Dawson Trail
- The rebellion ended in 1870 with the creation of the province of Manitoba
- The Manitoba Act was heavily influenced by Riel’s list of rights
- Ottawa promised the Métis and their children title to 1.4 million acres of land, then erected bureaucratic stumbling blocks to prevent them from taking possession (>145 yrs later the Métis are still litigating...)
- Louis Riel went into exile in the U.S., then returned to Canada in 1885 to lead a second rebellion, only to be caught, tried, and sentenced to death
The North-West Territories (Rupert’s Land and the North-Western Territory) are acquired by Canada from the Hudson’s Bay Company. From part of them Manitoba is created as the fifth province.
1871-75

- The Crown instructed Canada to enter into treaties with First Nations (The Numbered Treaties)
  - Treaties 1 – 7 were concluded in 1871 – 7, one treaty per year
  - The buffalo were vanishing from the prairies
  - Sir John A withheld food rations and starved First Nations into signing treaties and moving onto reserves in order to make room for the transcontinental railroad (more ethnic cleansing)

- The Numbered Treaties do not include most of British Columbia
  - Joseph Trutch, the first Lieutenant Governor of BC, was an overt racist who denied the existence of Aboriginal Title and refused to sign treaties with First Nations after BC entered into Confederation (in 1871)
  - The repercussions of this policy (both positive and negative) continue to this day
The “Parallel Universe” of Numbered Treaties and Indigenous Space
• The Indian Act was passed. It is not a treaty; it is Canada’s bureaucratic tool for regulating the lives of both treaty and non-treaty First Nations
  - Ottawa determined who is and who isn't a Status Indian
  - Status Indians were considered wards of the Crown, without voting rights
  - If an Indian wished to become enfranchised, he would lose his Status
  - No ownership of land or housing if living on a reserve
  - Status Indians couldn’t leave the reserve without permission of the Indian Agent, hire a lawyer to litigate a land claim, sell produce to non-Indians without permission, attend university or join the Armed Forces without losing Status, or wear traditional clothing and perform traditional ceremonies
  - Band governance structure is controlled by Ottawa

• The Indian Act essentially destroyed the political and economic institutions of First Nations, undermined their sovereignty, and created failed nations

• All the social determinants of health that are governed by the Indian Act (housing, education, economy, etc.) have been allowed to fail
"When the school is on the reserve, the child lives with its parents who are **savages**, and though he may learn to read and write, his habits and training and mode of thought are **Indian**. He is simply a **savage** who can read and write . . . **Indian** children should be withdrawn as much as possible from the parental influence, and the only way to do that would be to put them in central training industrial schools where they will acquire the habits and modes of thought of white men."

– Sir John A. MacDonald, from The House of Commons, Debates, 46 Vict. (May 9, 1883) 14: 1107-1108
The nadir for Indigenous health

• By 1885, there were only 100,000 Indigenous people living in Canada (a country of 10 million sq km)
  • In the prairies, virtually 100% of First Nations were starving and infected with tuberculosis (including children)
  • By 1880, virtually all of the buffalo were gone, which was disastrous for the First Nations and Métis economies

• Settler Canadians have internalized the false belief that Indigenous people are headed for extinction anyway, and that the most humane course of action would be to assimilate them as quickly as possible into the Canadian body politic

• This notion persisted well into the 1960’s (e.g., Sixties Scoop)
1904-07

- Dr. Peter Henderson Bryce (a graduate of U of T) was sent by Duncan Campbell Scott (the Deputy Superintendent, DIA) to inspect the residential schools of Manitoba and the North-West Territories.
  - He found that the mortality rate from TB was 24 – 69%.
  - He recommended some very basic public health measures that would have significantly reduced mortality and morbidity.
  - Duncan Campbell Scott refused to implement Bryce’s recommendations, despite the fact that Canada had a fiduciary duty to these children and had signed treaties with their ancestors.
“I want to get rid of the Indian problem...Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian Question and no Indian Department.”

Duncan Campbell Scott, 1920
What is genocide?

...any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

(a) Killing members of the group;
(b) Causing serious bodily harm, or harm to mental health, to members of the group;
(c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
(d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
(e) **Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.**

— UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, adopted by the UN General Assembly on 9 December, 1948; ratified on 12 January, 1951
1942-52: The nutrition experiments

- Canada conducted a series of nutrition experiments on First Nations children in residential schools (as disclosed by Ian Mosby in 2012)
- The experiments were in part supervised by Dr. Frederick Tisdall, one of the co-inventors of Pablum
- Children were placed on special diets and denied basic dental care to see if their gums would bleed
- None of this was done with their knowledge, their parents’ knowledge, or consent
- Survivors of these experiments recall being “hungry all the time”
- Today: obesity and diabetes are intergenerational eating disorders among residential school survivors
1949: Newfoundland and Labrador join Canada

- The Terms of Union (1948) make no mention of Indigenous people
- Prior to 1949, Indigenous Newfoundlanders could vote*, but Indigenous Canadians couldn’t
  - Following Confederation, they could still vote, but no ability to acquire Status under The Indian Act
  - No access to federal services until 1954
  - No Indian reserves until 1984
  - In 2002 the Labrador Innu acquired Status
  - In 2005, the Inuit of Labrador became self-governing, and formed the Nunatsiavut Government

- The Indigenous people of Newfoundland and Labrador didn’t finish joining Canada until 2005

*assuming there was an election and a legislature—there were none from 1934 to 1949
The explicit purpose of the residential schools was to destroy all of the mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of First Nations identity, and to place children in an environment that would harm them physically.

First Nations view health in terms of the medicine wheel:
- a combination of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual elements.

150,000 children attended residential schools from 1830 to 1996; at least 6,000 died while attending school, and many dies afterwards, primarily of TB.

In the 1960’s, the children of the children who attended residential schools were systematically apprehended and placed in Settler foster homes or adopted by Settler families (*The Sixties Scoop*).

The phrase ‘*complex intergenerational trauma*’ does not even begin to describe what these children and their communities experienced (and continue to experience to this day).
2008

- Prime Minister Harper offered a full apology on behalf of Canadians for the Indian Residential Schools system
- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established

2012

- The Harper government defunded Indigenous health
  - National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) closed
  - Native Women’s Association of Canada (NWAC) health budget was cut
  - Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) health budget was cut by 40%
  - Others affected: Native Healing Foundation, First Nations Statistical Institute, Métis National Council
2014

- My wife and I made a $10M gift to the University of Toronto, Faculty of Public Health
- This was a game-changer because Indigenous health researchers no longer have to look to the government that’s undermining the health of their communities to fund research into the health of their communities

Waakebiness-Bryce Institute for Indigenous Health

First endowed institute in the world to focus on building thriving Indigenous communities
2015

- The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada concluded that Canada committed *cultural genocide* against Indigenous people
  - A $3.8B compensation package negotiated in 2007 as part of the Indian Residential School Settlement Agreement (IRSSA) did not include Newfoundland and Labrador

2016

- Survivors who attended residential schools in Newfoundland (1) and Labrador (4), run by the International Grenfell Association or the Moravian Church from 1949 to 1980, reach a $50M settlement with Canada
Some final thoughts
Beware the ‘deficiency model’ of Indigenous health

• Indigenous people are sick because...
  • They lack the enzyme to break down alcohol
  • They lack the right genes to prevent diabetes
  • They lack proper parenting skills

VS.

• Indigenous civilizations possess unique ways of knowing and interacting with the world that can help Indigenous people—and the rest of humanity—to heal themselves
  • Indigenous people, in general, are temporarily unwell because of systemic factors which stem from a history of colonization and exploitation
  • Some Indigenous populations currently fare better than benchmark populations (e.g., the Mon of Myanmar) (*Lancet* 2016; 388: 131–57)
Secure attachment is a human right
Poor attachment is an inherited trauma
The opposite of addiction isn’t sobriety, it’s attachment.

—Sherrill Tekatsi:tsiak’awa
“Katsi” Cook Barreiro