

## **Vancouver Coastal Health: The current and future aboriginal health system in Lower mainland**

Health care is one of most important aspect of a successful nation. In Canada, Canadians are living under a well developed health system and enjoying health benefits that many others desire. However, numerous aboriginal people living in Canada are not able to receive the same health status. In fact, aboriginal people are the fastest growing population in Canada and they are among many negative health statistics. Therefore, it is extremely crucial to examine the aboriginal health and act productively and accordingly. Observing from the past to present, Vancouver coastal health represents an essential role to improve aboriginal health in B.C.

Historically, first nation suffered greatly from diseases such as smallpox, measles and tuberculosis. Yet, in Report to the minister, Indian health and health care Alert Bay B.C., majority of death during 1980 in B.C. were caused by alcoholism and drug abuse. Although the B.C. government identified the issue, it was obvious that its health agencies had not spent enough effort to assist the first nation. Perhaps, they were not able to find the effective treatment toward the issue. A brand new approach was strongly recommended when the author explained to the minister that "it is whole health, involving spiritual, social, and mental aspects of the life of the individual and the community" (page 7).

Nowadays, there are various types of agency that are available to provide health assistance from and off reserve. VCH is a very good instance. Unlike many other health agencies, VCH devotes recourses toward understanding the health condition and discovering passive ways to approach the First Nation. Community engagement program is one of the most successful. One of the leaders of the program, Peter Vlahos is responsible for the aboriginal region. He explains that the goal of the program is to encourage and increase community participation in health service

planning and decision-making by working closely with aboriginal community leaders. A lot of effort has been done toward care, research and education to increase the longevity and quality of life and to provide a positive experience for the natives. In addition, VCH strictly enforces integrity with its native's partners. It ensures that community inputs and recommendations are solicited in time to support the natives. Without any forceful measurement, VCH assesses the needs of the community and improves its service based on community feedback. Therefore, the health system in B.C. toward First Nation has developed and improved over time.

In addition to the current community engagement program, "aboriginal health and wellness plan" will be in effect in 2009. This is a further development in understanding the diversity of culture and enhance native health system. In order to achieve the goals, VCH will hire more first nation employees to address health issue, continue to develop, implement and evaluate aboriginal health service with respect to First Nation communities, and continue to build up relationships that respect self-determination and cultural community. Evan Adams, a VCH medicine doctor from Sliammon First Nation, commends that "Aboriginal health in general is improving, but we still cannot afford to take these issues lightly". He insists that people should cherish this opportunity to work together and contribute to aboriginal health. Hence, the two widely supported programs are vital and carried meaningful changes to native health in the Lower mainland.

Controversially, obstacles and hardships are not easy or yet to overcome. Not all First Nation members are recognized by Canadian government as a status Indian. For those who are not recognized, they are not able to receive the health benefits. They may still receive health benefits with paying high premiums which most of them are not able to afford. This would discourage them from approaching to health care system. In fact, this is one of the problems that negatively affects the current engagement

program. Moreover, some status Indian are not comfortable with Canadian health system even though they are recognized by the government. Due to various historical and social reasons, some of the First Nation reject health benefits provided by the government. It is a challenge to convince some natives to accept Canadian health care system. On the other hand, the roles and responsibilities between government and organizations are not clearly identified. Natives tend to be unsure where they can find assistance toward their problems. It would take more effort to overcome these obstacles in the future.

Vancouver Coastal Health represents an essential role to enhance aboriginal health. Peter Vlahos provides me with plenty important information regarding current and future health plan. He recommends that people should practise healthy living so that others would follow. One of the most interesting quote is that "a healthy community cannot exist without healthy community members". Through sharing and talking, people can learn from each other. Without great funding and planning, people are still able to contribute health to a community. Cooperation is the key to help not only the First Nation but also Canadian to improve the existing health system. VCH has also cherished the idea and definitely has accomplished a great amount toward health in Vancouver region. As a Canadian and partner of the First Nation, we should be determined to support the natives to receive an equal or better health care from the communities.

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