



Registry of Marriage and Family Therapists in Canada Inc.

First Nations and Inuit Peoples' Access to Family Therapists

Issue

1. First Nations and Inuit individuals, families and communities have access to professional mental health treatment through the services provided by provincial health care programs. Additional specialized mental health treatment is made available through the Non-Insured Health Benefits program, which focuses on individuals, families and communities which are in at risk, crisis situations. The services are limited to those provided by psychologists, psychiatric nurses and social workers.
2. First Nations and Inuit individuals, families and communities deserve to have access to registered Family Therapists who are trained to provide a full range of mental health services including short-term, culturally safe therapy.

Discussion

Family Therapists are well suited to provide therapeutic insights for First Nations and Inuit clientele. A narrative family systems perspective considers a meta-narrative for the First Nations person. It is not possible to orient a First Nations or Inuit person absent their oral tradition as it locates them within the history, culture, traditions, family legacy and **their** community of origin.

First Nations and Inuit families are communally based traditionally. They are based in a system referred to as 'the circle' which has a spiritual centre, is child-focused, and generally female led. This circle system is fundamentally 180 degrees opposite to the mainstream system of 'the box'. As part of colonization, the children of First Nations and Inuit families were forcibly removed from their homes to Residential schools. This began a paradigm shift within First Nations and Inuit families as their focus was lost with the children missing – and relationships were traumatically disrupted. The families and communities and cultures were traumatized, and this trauma has become multi-generational. It is currently referred to as Native Historical Trauma. Indicators of this trauma in families and individuals are: suicide, depression, rage, strong somatic disturbances, poor health, high death rate, reduced life span, and a high institutional population (Derrick 2005, 2009). A recently released report by Dr. Janet Smylie for the Centre for Research on Inner City Health (CRICH), St. Michaels Hospital, Toronto found that Indigenous children suffered from infant mortality rates up to four times the national average. She states: "The health disparities we encountered are clearly tied to social issues that disproportionately affect Aboriginal children". She identified "colonization as a shared and underlying determinant of Indigenous health."

In a newly released book, Where the Pavement Ends, the author Marie Wadden names twelve steps she believes must be taken in Canada in order to achieve Aboriginal recovery from colonization. Her eleventh step states: “Make the mental health and addiction needs of Aboriginal people an immediate national priority by improving the delivery of health care.”

Family Therapists are core mental health professionals along with psychiatry, psychology, social work, and psychiatric nursing. Family therapists are skilled mental health professionals who are uniquely trained to independently provide a full range of mental health services. Family Therapists (registered as Marriage and Family Therapists (MFT) in Canada) are the only mental health practitioners whose training focuses on family based interventions to individuals, couples and families. At a minimum they are master’s level mental health professionals with at least two years post-graduate supervised clinical experience. Registered Family Therapists are trained to assess and treat mental and emotional disorders in individuals, couples and families, whether they are cognitive, affective or behavioral in origin, with the application of psychotherapeutic and family systems theories and interventions.

Family Therapy replicates four critical components of First Nations and Inuit traditional families and the circle system upon which they are based:

- A focus on the family, within a community setting with an emphasis on holistic and traditional supports;
- Viewing the world through a systems perspective (in contrast with the individualistic, linear European/mainstream world view);
- A focus on relationships as key elements to mental health;
- A belief that every person is equal in value i.e. the therapist is not more important than the client. This ensures cultural safety for the First Nations and Inuit client.

The First Nations and Inuit experience is complex with multi and generational traumas which require significant experience and training to sufficiently address. Due to the emphasis on a systems approach, the Family Therapist’s origins provide a substantial basis to assert they are qualified and prepared to work within their scope of practice and expertise when assessing and treating First Nations and Inuit clientele. It is best practice to consider providers who have received their core training in systems approaches when addressing the First Nations and Inuit experience. Inclusion of Family Therapists as viable and appropriate First Nations and Inuit therapeutic providers is appropriate and dutiful. First Nations and Inuit individuals deserve to have options in therapeutic services which can also include providers who are grounded in theory and practice that are well suited to their experience and worldview.

Recommendation

First Nations and Inuit individuals, families and communities should have access to registered Family Therapists who are trained to provide a full range of mental health services including short-term, culturally safe therapy. Registered Family Therapists should be included as approved providers under the Non-Insured Health Providers program.

References:

- Derrick, Janet. When Turtle Met Rabbit: Native Family Systems in *Voices of Color*; Rastogi and Wieling, ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing, 2005. p43-63
- Derrick, Janet. Native Couple Therapy: Connecting, Rebuilding and Growing Beyond In *Multicultural Couple Therapy*, Rastogi and Thomas, ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publishing, 2009. p389 – 404.
- Smylie, Janet. Indigenous Children's Health Report Highlights Disparities in Canada. The Centre for Research on Inner City Health, St. Michaels Hospital, Toronto. News release April 2009.
- Wadden, Marie. *Where the Pavement Ends*. Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 2009. p241.