

Working towards Indigenous Health Equity

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Coming together to share knowledge and learn from each other is an important step towards understanding Indigenous culture and what health means to Indigenous people.

“You are very lucky to have this facility, the Napanee Area Community Health Centre (NACHC) here, especially since it has areas of the centre that are especially dedicated to Indigenous health,” said Laurel Claus Johnson, a member of the provincial Indigenous Health Council.

The 11-member council meets monthly between September and June to discuss the variety of Indigenous health programs available through the NACHC and its parent organization, the Kingston Community Health Centre (KCHC). One of the council’s goals is to ensure health equity for Indigenous people.

“Equity does not mean equality,” Claus Johnson said. “Equity has a more personal, more individualized connotation. It’s making sure that each person receives the health care that is appropriate to them. The current medical approach may not have the same ideas of Indigenous health; it may not have the same spiritual focus. So we are here to work together to provide the best health approach to know that the needs of all people will be met.”

Local physician Jeff Sloan, who teaches family medicine residents, said that he looks for more opportunity for residents to learn more about Indigenous Health. Claus Johnson said that she was grateful for the support from the Board of the KCHC, which oversees the other programs. Other professionals who have attended meetings at the NACHC include dental hygienists, nurses, nurse-practitioners, and social workers.

“It’s wonderful that you are all here to share your knowledge and learn more about Indigenous health,” Claus Johnson said. “We have more similarities than differences and we need to talk together.”

Indigenous Health programs at the NACHC and in Deseronto include counselling and traditional teachings with an Elder, services of an Indigenous Nurse Practitioner, and an Indigenous Community Development Worker. There are Indigenous Drum Circles and other cultural programs and workshops held at the centres.

One of the new programs now running in Deseronto is a Blood Pressure clinic. Nurse Practitioner Kate Brant said that this is done in a more holistic way than some might be useful, and the clinic in Deseronto is small.

“It’s almost like sitting in my kitchen,” Brant said. “We talk with the people and get to know what is affecting their blood pressure, so we can treat the body, and the spirit. The practices and protocols are based on Indigenous teachings.”

At the clinic, Brant can work with the patient to help maintain a healthy blood pressure, including maintaining blood pressure medications. She said that if any changes are needed then the patient would be referred back to their health care provider.

“Changes may be needed, but we can work with their health care provider to ensure that the patient is getting the best overall care,” Brant said. “Blood pressure is indicative of many health issues, so it’s important to have it well-monitored.”

While the Indigenous Health programs are based on Indigenous practices, they are open to anyone. These include the Cedar Lodge at the NACHC where Drum Circles and Craft Circles are held monthly. These programs are also held in Deseronto. At the NACHC there is a Sweat Lodge where anyone can come to receive some spiritual healing from the Elder.

“It’s all about relationship building and understanding the health needs of everyone. It’s looking at how these [Indigenous] health ideas will be presented and accepted in the community. How do we move forward to get the current medical professionals to work with and accept Indigenous health practices and practitioners?” Claus Johnson said. “That’s what health equity is too: to make sure that Indigenous people’s health concerns are treated well so that everyone gets the care they need. We need to put all of our energies together to include this spiritual content into healthcare and take it out of the silos.”

Brant added that it’s important to have these programs open to everyone so that non-Indigenous people can learn more about Indigenous culture, and Indigenous people can re-connect with their cultural practices that they may not have learned, or may have forgotten. To find out more about the Indigenous programs, call the NACHC, 613-354-8937, extension 7111.