



**Traditional Healing Circle of Elders  
Elsipogtog First Nation  
September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2007**



**First Nations Centre @ NAHO  
April 30, 2007**

## Background

The First Nations Centre's (FNC) Traditional Healing Circle of Elders is intended to be an annual event. It will be hosted in First Nations territory and will change locations from year to year. The main purpose of adding this recurring item to the FNC workplan was to support the creation of an environment where traditional First Nations Healers and Elders can come together to discuss needs and priorities related to traditional health, healing and related knowledge.

In the past, the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) had tried to organize Elders gatherings from the ground up (directing the process) but the process is expensive and time consuming. Through experience, especially regarding traditional health and healing activities, what has proven to work best is supporting traditional health related activities that are already occurring in First Nations communities.

In June 2006, a research officer from the FNC met with traditional Mi'kmaq Medicine Man David Gehue to discuss the potential for working together. It was agreed that the FNC could provide support for a ceremonial gathering that Mr. Gehue was in the process of organizing, while concurrently meeting the deliverable for the Traditional Healing Circle of Elders project.

This event took place from September 17-24, 2006 on Mi'kmaq traditional territory of the Elsipogtog First Nation. The event was planned around a core of ceremonial activities (see **Appendix A**). Over the course of the week, 700-800 people attended the various events. With regard to the presence of Elders, there was representation at the gathering from every region in Canada except for British Columbia. Many community members from Elsipogtog and surrounding First Nations communities on the East coast attended ceremonies and teachings that occurred throughout the week.

In the context of this larger event, the FNC was able to host a circle on September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2006 with the participation of Elders present at the gathering. The purpose of the circle was to identify and explore future directions for the FNC in the area of support and protection for traditional knowledge. As well, through participating in the event, an opportunity was presented for the FNC to make personal contact with various Elders and Medicine People from across Canada and to witness events that took place at the gathering.

From a medicine wheel perspective, which some First Nations use to express a holistic worldview, it seemed appropriate that the first occurrence of the Traditional Healing Circle of Elders event begin in the Eastern Door —Mi'kmaq/Maliceet territory. Participants reached a consensus that topics discussed in the circle could be written down and used by the FNC to advance their traditional health and healing objective. However, they also indicated that they wished to remain anonymous in this report and would like to receive a copy when completed. In general, points of discussion presented in this report are paraphrased, though an attempt to use consistent tone and language was made. Direct quotes are indicated as such by the use of quotation marks.

## **Themes**

Several themes emerged from the circle that took place on September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2006. They are listed below, and summarized through description and presentation of main points of discussion.

### Coming Together

In contemporary society, people often mobilize and help each other after situations of death, loss and destruction (e.g. events like 9/11, natural disasters like flooding in New Orleans or the tsunami in Indonesia). Indeed, this shows an inherently compassionate side to human beings. Ceremonies in Indigenous societies also involve a mobilization of resources and people helping each other to come together for healing and a celebration of positive life forces. Thus, aside from information and recommendations extracted from the Circle, facilitating the 'coming together' of healers and medicine people has merit in itself. Participants expressed the theme of 'Coming Together' in the following ways:

- Participation of the whole community working together is necessary for positive change;
- Being invited somewhere is an honour. Our communities have shared experiences everywhere and, therefore, our knowledge is related;
- Gathering to share information at the Circle and to bring back information to individual communities is important;
- There are not too many traditional gatherings any more, but we have to continue to do the work no matter what; and,
- Gatherings such as this empower people to go back to their community and help some of those who have fallen prey to addiction.

### First Nations Approaches to Medicine and Healing

First Nations approaches to medicine and healing are holistic and encompass body, mind and spirit. These ideas are elaborated in the discussion points listed below:

- Rather than intervening physiologically (e.g. surgery), the job of a healer or medicine person is to kick start the body's natural healing mechanisms. A medicine person's job is to get the person "to that door";
- Modern food is destroying our insides. It is time to incorporate more traditional foods into the diet. It is not impossible to grow good food and to eat it; and,

- Medicines are powerful and it is important to show them due respect. In modern society, a prescription for medication can often be filled by pharmacists as a result of a 5-15 minute visit to a doctor. In the Western system, time is money. Healers can help using a more detailed process of evaluation and treatment.

### Misconceptions and Stereotypes about Traditional Medicines

The circle discussed misconceptions and stereotypes that, in modern times, have affected people's perceptions and beliefs about traditional medicines. This theme was articulated in the following ways:

- The assumption that Native medicine cannot harm you is a myth. Medicines are local to a particular area and are embedded in local systems of knowledge. Trying to use medicines from different regions may cause confusion or produce undesired effects;
- The new-age movement goes against the grain of First Nations ownership of traditions and perpetuates false information;
- Mainstream misconceptions of traditional medicine and activities as witchcraft and sorcery need to be addressed; and,
- There is a backlash in modern society towards traditional medicine. This needs to be corrected.

### Importance of Ceremony

The participants in the circle discussed and reached consensus on the importance and challenges of maintaining ceremonies. Major points of discussion included:

- It is important to honour the medicine bundles and the teachings that occur in ceremony;
- Alcohol or drug abuse means that the substance has become more powerful than a person's will. It is time to 'declare war' on drugs and alcohol and begin to use ceremonies to combat this phenomenon;
- Ceremony remains important because it helps people. Many people come with their problems (as was the case in Elsipogtog) and sometimes ceremony is the only avenue that can change things. People come wanting to learn something and wanting help;
- It is challenging in modern times to conduct big ceremonies, with regard to the logistics and resources (e.g. food, helpers, taking time off work). Nonetheless, interest in traditional lodges is growing within communities;

- It is important to maintain ceremonies and spirituality but physical needs cannot be neglected ‘in the name of ceremony’. People still need to think about making a good salary to meet the needs of their families and then work ceremony into their lifestyle; and,
- Ceremony helps people to incorporate healthy values such as respect, love courage, humility, truth, trust and strength into their daily lives.

### Youth

Several of the participants mentioned that youth issues urgently demand attention and support. Prominent observations and issues included:

- There is a big difference in how Elders grew up and how youth are growing up today;
- Youth are frustrated, but they respond to activities. Often they drop out of school and stay at home, or move around a lot between cities and communities which makes them more susceptible to drug and alcohol abuse;
- Teenagers need help getting integrated back into their communities (including young offenders);
- Young offenders are in their situation usually because of drugs and alcohol. They have made a mistake and it is important not to shun them;
- Mentorship for youth is important so that they can trust an elder person;
- Activities such as the Unity Ride/Run have shown very positive results among youth. Events such as these combat problems of addiction or identity conflict. The Unity Run promotes wellness, culture and connects youth to the Elders and to the land. When they get home, they feel good and know who they are. The North American Indigenous Games has also been a positive experience;
- Crystal meth is coming into communities now, as well as alcohol and “pill” (i.e. prescription drug) abuse; and,
- It is important to start with the children - they are enthusiastic.

### The Land

The importance of the land as a source of health was discussed in detail by the participants. The following specific points were mentioned:

- The sacredness of the land has never lost its power. It still has power and it is up to us to maintain our relationship to it;

- Within the last 50 years, there has been a movement away from the land and a greater dependence on the man-made system. When people fall into a system, it is hard to get out of that system because everyone wants control and it is inherently hierarchical;
- It remains important to teach through the land. Young men and women should spend a period of three to four weeks on the land. ‘Rites of passage’ connected to the land instruct girls on how to become women and boys on how to become men;
- Youth and children need to be disengaged from the modern system for a while. “Turn the television off and camp outside your community”; and,
- The land teaches people the correct order of things. People do not complain about each other as much and have to put their minds together to come up with solutions.

### Natural Law

The following comments reflected the theme of natural law and its relationship to health:

- The Creator gave natural law to everything on earth. Very few are able to follow these today with concentrated discipline;
- Natural laws, nonetheless, retain their power. This power should be recognized with gifts and offerings. Paying more attention to laws of the current ‘system’ has resulted in loss of pride in who we are as First Nations people; and,
- The power of the natural laws still lives within everyone. The responsibility of First Nations environmental stewardship has not disappeared, however people become brainwashed for money. Natural resource companies seem to take 100% from communities and only give 50% back.

### **Recommendations**

The logistics of participating in the organization of a traditional gathering of this size (e.g. assuring regional representation, finding an appropriate ceremonial situation, travel, lodging, honoraria etc.) are difficult and not to be underestimated. Overall, the event was a success. The general theme of the Traditional Healing Circle of Elders should be maintained, however it is recommended that smaller gatherings and activities be attended and supported under this theme throughout the year. There are numerous ceremonial activities that occur throughout the country each year, some of which could be attended and/or partially facilitated by the FNC. Information can be gathered with permission. With respect to the FNC’s presence at traditional health and healing events, flexibility is

definitely an asset. This would allow the Centre to participate in a greater number and variety of worthwhile events.

In terms of future work in this area, participants in the Circle had several specific recommendations, and others were extrapolated from the discussion. Major recommendations are:

- Continue to support activities that facilitate First Nations Elders/Medicine People conducting ceremonies and sharing knowledge;
- Work towards making First Nations medicines and treatments more accessible to those that desire to use them;
- Help to dispel mainstream myths about First Nations traditional medicines and healing practices;
- Emphasize creating and promoting healthy traditional spaces in communities where youth can go if the pressure of drugs and alcohol becomes too great;
- Begin developing useful materials and policies that would facilitate the work of traditional Healers and Medicine People. For example, the process of accreditation of traditional Healers by the Indian Health Service in the United States is much further along than Canada;
- Promote healthy activities for youth, such as the Unity Ride, North American Indigenous Games or local sports and promote positive mentorship;
- Support land based traditional camps, especially when there is an opportunity to bridge western and traditional medical knowledge;
- In the context of environmental health, explore and articulate First Nations perceptions of Natural Law and its relationship to health; and,
- NAHO could consider helping to facilitate a World Indigenous Society of Elders.

### **Suggested Next Steps**

- Identify future activities that are being undertaken by the Elders and Healers that were present at the gathering and consider ways to provide support;
- There are a number of models for providing access to traditional healing practices (e.g. Anishinaabe Health Toronto, Akwesasne Traditional Healing Lodge, Iyiniwak Traditional Healers Gathering, UMIYAC/ACT Health Brigades). Potentially, the FNC could document case studies and develop a compilation of best or promising practices in providing access to traditional healing;

- NAHO is currently redesigning its website, and a section on Traditional Knowledge and Health is planned. The FNC could contribute content that specifically address some of the recommendations in this report, such as the need to dispel myths about traditional healing;
- Review RCAP recommendations related to traditional health (e.g. healing lodges), particularly with respect to Youth. The FNC could develop some health promotion materials featuring traditional health knowledge and activities;
- Investigate how the U.S. Indian Health Service (IHS) incorporates traditional healing; is there recognition of traditional ‘services’ as a national or IHS wide policy? The FNC could undertake a system/policy review of IHS traditional healing initiatives;
- NAHO is currently represented at the Aboriginal Sport and Physical Activity Working Group, and the North American Indigenous Games are planned for 2008. The FNC could consider ways to support these events in light of the recommendations in this report;
- The FNC could consider ways to support existing land-based activities for youth (e.g. “culture camps”). The value of these initiatives could also be showcased through one, or a series of case studies or research reports;
- The FNC could develop a research paper on environmental issues and traditional knowledge and health; and,
- A World Indigenous Society of Elders (or some version of it) has been recommended on numerous occasions. The FNC could consider ways to support the development of such an initiative.

## Appendix A

Gathering of Nations Event  
Elsipogtog Healing Lodge (Big Cove) First Nation, New Brunswick  
September 17 – 23, 2006

| <b>Date</b>  | <b>Activities</b>   |
|--------------|---|
| September 17 | Arrival<br>Lighting of the Sacred Fire<br>Traditional ceremony & sweats   |
| September 18 | Welcoming and Open Prayer<br>Smudging<br>Introductions<br>Doctoring<br>Sweat  |
| September 19 | Traditional Healing Circle of Elders (youth are invited and encouraged to participate)<br>Doctoring<br>Sweat<br>Feast |
| September 20 | Sharing Medicines and Knowledge<br>Doctoring<br>Changing of seasons sweat<br>Feast                                    |
| September 21 | Wampum Belt Teachings<br>Doctoring<br>Sweats<br>Spirit feast (for shake tent ceremony)                                |
| September 22 | Women's Shaking Tent Ceremony takes place evening   |
| September 23 | Closing Ceremonies<br>Travel Day  |