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Metis Identity

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Métis Identity: Sharing Traditional Knowledge and Healing Practices at Métis Elders' Gatherings

Lois Edge

Tom McCallum

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This article is dedicated to the memory of Marion Larkman who passed away peacefully on December 18, 2006.[1] She was born on May 19, 1926 on the Curve Lake First Nations Reserve and raised on a Métis settlement at Burleigh Falls, Ontario. Marion was a trapper, served in the military during the Second World War, and was a mother of twelve children and an active member of the Métis Nation of Ontario. In recent years, Marion dedicated her energies to preserving and protecting Métis history, values, traditions and pride in Métis arts and culture.

This initiative was made possible through the support of the Métis Centre at the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) with funding from Health Canada.

1 Métis Nation of Ontario. Website: http://www.metisnation.org/community/Marion_Larkman/marion_home.html. Accessed December 20, 2006.

Abstract

The adoption of a holistic and population health approach to Métis health encourages us to consider indicators other than physical health that may contribute to our health and wellness as Métis. This article represents an overview of a traditional knowledge project with Métis Elders from across Canada, initiated by the Métis Centre at the National Aboriginal Health Organization. It is a collaboration between a Métis researcher and one of the Métis Elders who participated in the national and regional Métis Elders' Gatherings over a four-year period. Based upon a collaborative presentation at the 2006 Healing Our Spirit Worldwide conference, the authors present their experiences as participants in this unique initiative as shared by the group of Métis Elders, seniors and healers with whom they engaged. From the knowledge made available through this process, factors that contribute to Métis identity, health, healing and wellness are identified and further explored. The foundations for the article rest on the following themes identified by project participants: health and healing by Métis through listening to ancestral voices; a return to the Michif language; a greater awareness of the significance of the role of Métis women and family to the health of communities; a better understanding of the centrality of our relationship to the environment for individual and community health and wellness; and an awareness of historical, cultural and Aboriginal language perspectives for understanding traditional cultural practices and protocols. The Métis Elders' Gatherings are a demonstration of how events can facilitate and foster the exchange and practice of traditional knowledge in a respectful and reciprocal manner. It was a clear outcome of the process to the participating Métis Elders, seniors and healers



Artwork by Christi Belcourt. Courtesy of Métis Centre.

that this type of collaborative community-based research initiative contributes to the enhancement of their own health as Métis today and, therefore, in turn, will contribute to the health of future generations.

Background

The Métis Centre has adopted a dual approach to Métis health. The infinity symbol, as seen on the Métis Centre logo, symbolizes the creation of a new society with roots in both Aboriginal and European cultures and traditions. It also suggests that the Métis people will exist forever. For the Métis Centre, it also serves to illustrate our dual approach to Métis health — the adoption of a holistic approach, inclusive of the mental, physical, spiritual emotional and social aspects of health and wellness, and looking through a lens of the broader determinants of health such as employment, income, education, culture, social environment, geography, spirituality, etc., as identified by Health Canada.[2]

Métis traditional knowledge, traditional health knowledge and healing practices are based upon a foundation of Métis culture and viewed by Métis to be fundamental to Métis health and contribute to individual well-being and community wellness. Participants at a policy forum on Métis health held in 2002 encouraged reflection upon the health of Métis, "to re-imagine Métis health … using everyday forms of knowing including intuition, oral history, natural environments, traditional knowledge, spiritual guidance, and, stories" as "basic to informing Aboriginal people's health."[3] Stories told by Métis tell us about a way of life based upon Métis experiences that identify relationships important to Métis health and to Métis as a people, where "without culture there can be no healing."[4]

Forum participants identified a need to gather, document, share and relearn traditional knowledge and expressed a desire for Métis wisdom to be incorporated into Métis health research and policy. The Métis Health Policy Forum (2002) affirmed a need for the Métis Centre to establish an ongoing

2 Métis Centre @ NAHO (2002) Environmental Scan of Métis Health Initiatives, Programs and Services. Prepared by James Lamouche. Website: http://www.naho.ca/MHC_Site/default.html. Accessed July 15, 2006.

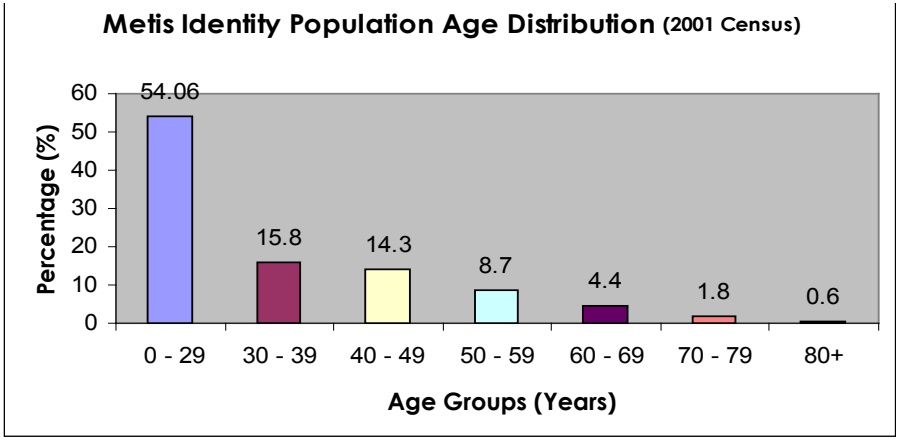
3 Métis Centre @ NAHO (2002) Review of Métis Health Policy Forum Proceedings. Prepared by Lois Edge. Website: http://www.naho.ca/MHC_Site/B/review.html. Accessed December 15, 2006.

4 Métis Centre @ NAHO (2002) Review of Métis Health Policy Forum Proceedings. Prepared by Lois Edge. Website: http://www.naho.ca/MHC_Site/B/review.html. Accessed December 15, 2006.

partnership and working relationship with Métis Elders in consideration of the esteemed role of Métis Elders within Métis society, including its culture, traditions and practices.[5] In working to raise awareness and promote Métis health, the Métis Centre supported this work with Métis Elders to learn more about traditional health knowledge and healing as practiced by Métis.

In addition to a recognized need amongst Métis people, in general, to focus on improvements to their own health and wellness as a population, available statistics from Canadian census data suggest strongly that a similar recognition is needed by the national and provincial health systems in Canada. In 2001, Métis Seniors over age 65 years made up about four percent of the Métis population[6] in comparison to thirteen percent of non-Aboriginal Canadians. One in three Aboriginal people self-identified as Métis.[7] Most live in the Prairie Provinces with slightly more than two-thirds residing in urban centres.

Figure 1. Métis Identity Population Age Distribution. Statistics Canada.



Eighty percent of eight hundred Métis who participated in a public opinion poll (2002) concerning Aboriginal health consider the revitalization of Aboriginal culture and traditions as necessary towards improving our current health care system.[8] Approximately sixty percent of Métis did not know

5 Métis Centre @ NAHO (2002) Review of Métis Health Policy Forum Proceedings. Prepared by Lois Edge. Website: http://www.naho.ca/MHC_Site/B/review.html. Accessed December 15, 2006.

6 Statistics Canada (2004) A Profile of Canada's Métis Population. Ottawa.

7 Statistics Canada (2004) A Profile of Canada's Métis Population. Ottawa.

8 National Aboriginal Health Organization (2002) Public Opinion Poll. Métis Section. http://

where to get traditional medicines or do not have access to traditional healing practices. A similar number attribute poor health to experiences in the residential school system and to the loss of land and culture.[9]

Methodology

With the support of the Métis Centre, a series of national and regional gatherings brought together elderly Métis from regions across the country including British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario, the Northwest Territories and Métis Settlements of Alberta. The purpose of the gatherings was to facilitate an opportunity to bring participants together to recognize, share, protect, affirm, use and revitalize traditional health knowledge and healing practices.

Approximately twenty participants who self-identified as Elders, seniors and/or healers attended a series of national and regional gatherings over a four-year period beginning in 2003 and concluding in 2006. These Elder representatives from various communities and urban centres shared their wisdom, knowledge and experiences to enhance the Métis Centre's understanding of factors that contribute to Métis health and wellness.

Topics identified as significant to this group include Métis identity, traditional health knowledge and healing practices, the role of women and family to community health, the importance of the Michif language and other Aboriginal languages to Métis perspectives, and the significance of Métis relationships with the land, water and environment to Métis culture. A series of four small regional gatherings held during 2005-6 focused on these specific areas of interest. One intended outcome was a series of booklets on these subjects.

Each of the Métis Elders Gatherings was facilitated by Métis Centre researcher, Lois Edge. Current Métis population health information and indigenous knowledge research was shared with participants who, in turn, shared stories, histories, and experiences from Métis perspectives. Every effort was made to ensure there was an equitable exchange of forms of health perspectives and knowledge, incorporating contemporary academic and "Western" scientific knowledge and health information and traditional Métis health and wellness knowledge. Discussions were documented by hand and/or tape

www.naho.ca/MHC_Site/C/knowledge.html Accessed July 15, 2006.

9 National Aboriginal Health Organization (2002) Public Opinion Poll. Métis Section. http://www.naho.ca/MHC_Site/C/knowledge.html Accessed July 15, 2006.

and/or video recording of sessions. Copies of draft publications are forwarded to participants for their review, comment and approval. It was determined by the researcher to actively engage project participants as equitable partners in decision-making by consensus throughout the project in a manner that allowed for participants to guide and contribute to the development of project activities and outcomes.

Cultural protocols as practiced by some of these Métis Elders, and as requested and encouraged by event participants, were observed throughout the project. A talking circle approach was used to facilitate discussions and ensure equitable opportunities for individual participation. The group determined some of the information relating to traditional medicines and healing should not be documented or shared as participants felt it was not within their authority to share some types of traditional knowledge within this context. Participants were invited to make offerings of tobacco, attend pipe ceremonies, to participate in sharing circles and attend a sweat lodge ceremony. The group was honoured with a drum song by First Nations drummers at one of the events in Morley, Alberta.

Individuals who attended these events were not representative of specific organizations. Rather, participants attended as residents within particular regions. It was clearly understood that the teachings as shared by these Elders were those of individuals and not representative of any particular organization, community, regional or tribal group. There was considerable regional diversity expressed within the group that is reflective of the individual's experience and diversity of Métis experiences across the country.

Participants to the Métis Elders Gatherings shared stories about their experiences hunting, trapping, fishing and gathering medicines on the land and their relationship with the land and water. Each shared teachings and ceremonies from their respective regions. They discussed their work as Elders in their communities and the challenges they faced in working with Elders and Youth, in being viewed as teachers and role models, and in their own health status as Elderly Métis. Participants reflected upon their shared experiences of loss and colonization, the health status, issues and needs of their families and communities, and their own health needs as individuals.

Based upon the proceedings of the first four national Métis Elders Gatherings and as guided by participants, the Métis Centre undertook to develop the Métis Perspectives and Traditional Health Knowledge Series. Three

thousand copies of the first booklet, "Profiles of Métis Elders" [10] were widely disseminated across the country to community members at regional events and assemblies and made available online. Subsequent booklets are currently under development and share Métis perspectives about Métis health and healing, returning to the Michif language, Métis women and family, and land and water. These publications will identify historical factors that impact Métis health, discuss living our lives contemporarily as Métis today, and share Michif and Aboriginal language perspectives and guiding principles for healing and wellness. Métis Elders contributions are acknowledged and a listing of recommended resources and websites are included in each booklet.

This article is based upon a collaborative presentation at Healing Our Spirit Worldwide 5th Gathering held in Edmonton, Alberta in early August of 2006. The goal of the collaborative presentation between Lois Edge and Tom McCallum, one of the Métis Elders who participated in the national and regional Métis Elders' Gatherings, was to share information on Métis Elders' knowledge and wisdom as experienced during the Métis Elders Gatherings. That presentation format shifted back and forth between the researcher's narration of observations, findings and shared experiences during the research process, and Tom McCallum's oration, where he shared his knowledge, wisdom and experiences. This paper attempts to reproduce that format by quoting Tom verbatim and interspersing his comments throughout, in much the same way that the conference presentation proceeded. These sections appear in the first person with the text indented. Métis perspectives were shared and conveyed through oral tradition and storytelling at the gatherings and require a central place in the structure and telling of this "story."

Introduction

> A question often asked is and not clearly understood is "Who are Métis?" According to written history, Métis are descendents, or offspring, of French fur traders and Native women. The French travelled into the country seeking out furs and became involved with Native women. It was suggested to these French fur traders that they should try to marry a Chief's daughter or the daughter of a prominent member of

10 Métis Centre @ NAHO (2005) Profiles of Métis Elders. Métis Perspectives and Traditional Health Knowledge Series No. 01. Prepared by Christi Belcourt and Lori Villebrun. Ottawa.

the community. This way all the furs would come to them. That is how the French came to control the fur trade.

One of the biggest companies was the Northwest Company, who were French. They were based out of Montreal. On the other side, was the Hudson Bay Company based in the Hudson Bay area. They were the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant English and Scottish people who came there. Their way of dealing with the Native people was they wanted the Native people to come to them to their Forts. They did not want to send their people out into the country. But the Natives did come. So eventually they had offspring, between the Native women and these English and Scottish employees. The head office called them Half-Breeds, because they did not want to identify with Métis because the Métis were French, Roman Catholic. These were white Anglo-Saxon, Protestants of the Hudson Bay Company. They sent some of their offspring to England to get them educated. Because English people were so class conscious, they did not like the term half-breed and they called their offspring "Country-Born."

In the early 1700 and 1800s, all of this was happening. Around 1800 there was a big rivalry in the market for furs between the Northwest Company and the Hudson Bay Company. The Hudson Bay Company amalgamated with the Northwest Company and became known as the Hudson Bay Company. What happened was they did not need the employees of the Northwest Company anymore, who were all French Roman Catholic Half-Breeds, so they were all out of work. This first case of mass employment happened to the French Métis, as they were known at the time.

There was also mixture between the English and French and the offspring also were starting to mix. They became known as Métis, just Métis. The terms "half-breed" and "country-born" died out. There were other names applied to them, such as "*bois brulé*," because the offspring were dark, yet

they had European features. "*Bois brulé*" means burnt sticks in French. There was another name that the Anishinabe people, commonly known as Ojibwe, called them, "*wesah-kotewenowak*." This translates to mean "where a fire has gone through, burnt everything, and new shoots are coming out of the ground." That's how they referred to the Métis, the new Nation of people who emerged.

Today, a lot of this has changed. The government was pressing for a national definition so they came up with a national definition of who is Métis. There are three points that are emphasized: one is the person has to self-identify as Métis, the community has to recognize you as Métis, and you have to be a descendent of the Métis people from the historic Métis homeland. The homeland includes parts of Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia, part of the Northwest Territories and parts of North Dakota, where the original Métis Nation emerged. You have to fulfill these three criteria to be recognized as a Métis. There are other people who are mixed-blood east of Ontario who are not recognized as Métis today. "*Otipemisiwak*," is a Cree term that refers to Métis as the "people who own themselves" or "people who govern themselves." [11]

Back home in Isle-a-La Crosse, Saskatchewan, where I come from, we did not refer to ourselves as Métis. In our language, we say "*apihtaw'kosisan*," that is what we call ourselves. I know they have this term in Alberta also. "*Apihtaw'kosisan*," can be translated to mean Half-Breed, but literally translated, it means "kind of a half-son." That comes from the Cree language, which is what they speak in Isle-a-La Crosse, with French words mixed within it. The words that are French are usually the nouns and the verbs are in Cree. So that is the concept of being Métis. When we were growing up, we didn't need to have any definition of any kind, because ev-

11 Métis Elder, Tom McCallum. British Columbia.

erybody knew everybody back home — they knew who they were, and how they lived, everything.

But today in the city, it is different. People need to identify themselves. People, Métis people who are now finding out that they are Métis, are really, really pushing really hard, it is kind of like a nationalism that is happening with them. Whereas, back home it wasn't that way. People are still continuing to live and speak the language as they did. It is harder, because many of the younger people are losing their language. They still identify themselves as "*apihtaw'kosisan*," and with the language itself. Even though they lose the language, they still refer to themselves in that way, as "*apihtaw'kosisan*."

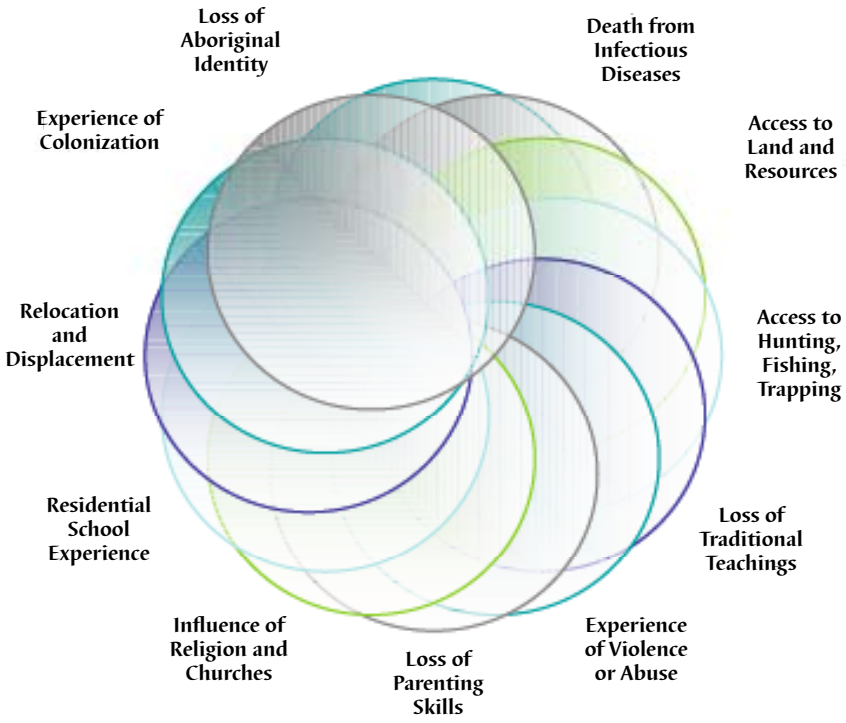
Métis Health and Healing: In the Words of Our Ancestors

The publication "Métis Health and Healing: In the Words of Our Ancestors," [12] identifies historical factors discussed at the regional gathering as impacting upon Métis health and identity. The Métis Elders Gathering participants shared common experiences such as colonization, loss of Aboriginal identity, loss of Aboriginal languages, death of family members from infectious disease, loss of access to land and resources, loss of access to hunting, fishing and trapping, loss of traditional teachings, experiences with violence and abuse, loss of parenting skills, influences of religion and churches, experience of relocation and displacement, and of residential school. These factors were determined to impact Métis identity.

A consistent theme of loss as experienced by participants was shared at each of the gatherings. Each time the group came together, initial discussion focused on the challenges faced by each, both historically and contemporarily, during their lifetime as Métis. Over time, it became necessary to facilitate opportunities for the sharing of grief and anger to allow for individual healing. These many losses are considered to impact the mental, physical, spiritual, emotional and social aspects of the health and wellness of Métis to-

12 Métis Centre @ NAHO (2007) Métis Health and Healing: In the Words of Our Ancestors. Draft in Progress. Métis Perspectives and Traditional Health Knowledge Series No. 02. Prepared by Lois Edge, Tom "Spotted Horse" McCallum, Alma Desjarlais, Albert Desjarlais, Francis Dumais, Michael Maurice, George "Lonewalker" McDermott. Ottawa.

Figure 2. Historical Factors Impacting Métis Identity and Health Status



day. Participants repeatedly commented on how the Métis Elders' Gatherings provided an opportunity for them to focus on their own healing, health and wellness and in serving as a forum where they could share their experiences, to re-energize and remain motivated to continue in their work as Elders in their families, community and respective regions.

> We didn't call them residential schools at home because they were not funded by the federal government. They had one residential school about thirty miles south of Isle a La Crosse. It was for status Indians, treaty Indians; they call them *"ski-cowyiniwak."* And that's where they went. We had another school, a boarding school in Isle-a-La Crosse, for all the Métis in the surrounding area. That's where all the kids went. Around two or three hundred kids went to that school. It was called a boarding school and was not funded by the fed-

eral government, to my knowledge. I don't know how the priests worked it, but it was run by the priests. I forgot what they called it. And it was the grey nuns that ran the girl's convent. The girls lived in a separate residence and the boys lived in a separate residence. There was a brother that took care of them. I forget what they called him.

My experience when I was there, when I went there, I was about twelve years old, in Grade Five or Six. I was lucky I was that old already because one of the Brothers there was molesting the younger Grade One's, every night. We would all be in a big dormitory and he had an office in the corner. Every night he took a young kid in there. Sometimes they would come out with an apple or an orange. We'd all ask them, what happened in there. They wouldn't say nothing. They wouldn't tell us. They must have been embarrassed or something. But it happened. Other people knew about it.

One other brother there, that kept them, he was really mean, in terms of physical violence. Like, he used to strap us a lot. For anything, that kid would get a strap. And, we'd have to take our pants off, and lay over a bed, bare bum, he would strap us. And, we would have to kneel a lot. Whenever we did something, make you kneel in the corner, make you kneel in the corner, that's where you would kneel. And then we had movies, every Tuesday night, there would be a show. What they call shows, those reel-to-reel shows, a long time ago. It was really something. But, a lot of times, I wasn't able to go, because I had done something bad. And they would give us a black mark. They had all our names written on a big paper on the wall. And they had black marks on each. And mine, it was a solid black mark across. I don't think I seen a show in a year. The only time I remember going to a show, it was about the Ten Commandments, stuff like that. That's when I was able to go.

> And, these are some of the things that I experienced being in there. Although there were a lot of kids to play with, at the time that I went, they didn't really understand, they hadn't really decided that we couldn't speak our language. Whenever they were around we had to speak English, but when we were away from them we spoke our language. But the saddest part of it was being away from the family. It was hard to see them. A lot of them had to travel a long distance. Some of those kids never saw their parents all year. It was really difficult for them. I'm really fortunate because I only spent a year there. I took off and I went home, and they never bothered me. I was really fortunate for that. There were a lot of kids there that spent years in a situation like that. There are other people that going to school really helped, in terms of education. There were others that quit school, to go fishing, to go trapping, because that is the life they wanted to live. We went to Church lots. Oh, man, we went to Church lots. I started serving mass, and I really, really believed in that way of life. And, it didn't really work out for me because I saw these people that were supposed to be workers for God, like the priests, not all of them, so I started to pull away from the Church. That was my experience.

Another important theme for the group was the concept of thinking from an Aboriginal language perspective, especially for those who understand or are fluent in an Aboriginal language. The loss of Aboriginal languages is especially painful for those who did not learn their language. Some fluent speakers voiced regret in not teaching their language to their children. Others are actively involved in teaching the Michif language today and shared some of their experiences. The participants readily agreed that Aboriginal languages must be considered as foundational to Indigenous knowledge.

> To my knowledge, we are told that when we speak Cree and tell jokes among Cree people who speak an Aboriginal language, we can laugh a lot. Even the way we say the words, we can have a play on words. If you say it in English, it's not even funny. Sometimes it is not even funny.

Aboriginal languages are verb-based and the English language is a noun-based language. And it is hard to translate from one to another, from a verb to a noun. We have a relationship with the whole universe from an Aboriginal perspective whereas in the English language, you have nouns and you objectify things — you are separate from, when you speak English, you are separate from something, you are not a part of it.

Like, even the word, Cree, that is not who we are, Cree is a French word that was applied to us by the French people. They saw how we were, and they said "*le cris.*" And, the English-speaking people could not say "*le cris*," so they said Cree.

What we are is "*nehiyaw.*" "*Nehiyaw*" is singular. "*Nehiyawak*" is the plural, meaning all of them. What that means, is it comes from two root words. The "*ne*" comes from the word "*newo*" which means four, and "*hiyaw*" comes from the word "*iyaw*" which means body. So, we are the "four-body people," or "four-directions" people.[13]

That one word describes an individual and their connection to the whole universe and describes the whole universe at the same time. So that is what is meant by a verb-based language, automatically you are thinking about your connection to all of the whole of the universe when you speak that language, that Aboriginal language, what we call Cree today, "*nehiyawin.*"

So you have a totally different world view, when you speak an Aboriginal language than when you speak the English language. When you speak the English language, it is almost like you are apart from, yet when you speak an Aboriginal language, you are a part of.

13 Source: Albert Lightning.

> So that is a big difference that we have, we are related, that's why we say we are related to the whole universe. That's the importance of having and understanding and learning to speak what we call Cree or an Aboriginal language. It changes the world view completely and you have a different understanding of everything that grows here on Mother Earth.

Discussion at the regional meeting on health and healing as attended by six individuals recognized as Elders and healers within the group and their respective communities focused on the questions "How does one become an Elder" and "What does it mean to be an Elder in one's community?" Elders were described by the group as individuals who have earned the respect of others and who maintain good reputations within their communities. Oftentimes, they may hold specialized knowledge, for example, in the areas of traditional medicine, as midwives, spiritual healers, storytellers, historians, hunters, trappers, fishermen or gatherers, as advisors or counselors, etc. An Elder is often well-known within a region as someone who has done good work throughout their lifetime and who is well-liked. An Elder may also be someone who is younger who is either gifted or who has earned people's respect.

> This has been a controversy for a number of years, about an Elder, who is an Elder? All of these questions come up and no one can really answer them. And again, we are looking at it from a different linguistic perspective, a different set of eyes from who we really are. We don't look at it from an Aboriginal perspective. Because the word "Elder" itself comes from the Mormon people. Mormons have what they call "Elders." You have to realize that Mormons are one people, with one language, and usually with one belief system. Aboriginal people are very, very diverse, with different languages, customs, and cultures. English-speaking people are trying to look at this term and are trying to amalgamate everything into one term — that word "Elder."
>
> In my language, it is very difficult to say Elder. You can say, "*kihteayak*." "*Kihteayak*," you can actually translate that into

Elder. But "*kihteayak*" actually means someone that is mature, a mature individual. That has to do with age, when you mature in age, that is what that means. And, of course, when someone says "*kihteayak*," right away you think of old, old, old, old people, very old people. "*Kihteayak*," that's what we say.

Now, from the Cree language, you have many, many definitions of people, and the roles that they play in the community. "*Otsapahcikewenow*," is what we say for some people who do ceremonies. "*Otsapahcak*" means being able to see into the future. And this is what the person says when he does ceremonies, you see into the future. And you open that channel of communication into the spirit world so that they come and help us out and tell us about things.

Now, there is another one, "*Maskikiwenow*." "*Maskiki*" is a medicine, like a medicine person, but it is a person who deals in medicines. That's who it is, "*maskikiwenow*." So there are all these different things.

"*Ohnekanapew*" is another one. That's the one that sits in the front, maybe at a pipe ceremony, or sits at the head. Maybe he smokes the pipe, and does the thoughts, makes sure everything is done in the proper protocol. "*Ohnekanapew*." And these people are called from many different places, because they know, other people know that these people know how to do things properly, they know the protocols. So that's "*ohnekanapew*."

Trying to amalgamate all of these things into one person is very difficult. Some persons have multiple things or gifts, but no one that I know of has all of them. So from the English language, you are trying to amalgamate all of these different people into one and call them an Elder. There's a lot of controversy on that. Because there are a lot of people who don't know their language, don't know their customs, don't know their culture. They don't know how to do the ceremonies or

> how the ceremonies are done. But they are older and they are retired. And, they have been in the community, and working, maybe as an administrator. And somewhere they have gained extensive knowledge, working with paper, paperwork, working with government, negotiating, writing policy. Does the word Elder fit for them? These are the kind of difficulties we run into when we talk about the word Elder.
>
> We have to be very specific by what we mean when we talk about the word "Elder." We have to be very specific by what we mean by "Elder" and it is up to the people who are calling on these Elders to have them assist them to explain exactly what it is that they are looking for. If they are looking for somebody with extensive knowledge in policy writing, then they say we want Elders and for our purposes the term "Elder" represents people who have extensive knowledge in policy writing and administration. OK, that then is their Elder. That's good, nothing wrong with that. Now, if they want people who understand the culture, the history of the culture, and the ceremonies, they will say for their purposes the term "Elder" refers to this. And that way they will save themselves a lot of grief. So that is my understanding of some of the problems when we use the term "Elder." *Eksi.*

After lengthy discussion and reflection, participants determined the most important information they could share would be to ask readers to reflect upon the questions "Who is an Elder" and "How do I approach an Elder?" No one within the group felt they had the authority to share traditional health knowledge and healing practices with others in this context. Rather, they felt very strongly that people needed to know the proper protocol to approach an Elder or a Healer. For those familiar with established traditional protocols, it is customary to approach an Elder with an offering of a pouch of pipe tobacco and a meter of cloth. Different colours of cloth have different meanings to different tribal groups. To share this basic first step was considered by the Métis Elders' Gathering participants to be the most important awareness for individuals who wish to learn about traditional health knowledge and healing practices and who choose to embark upon a journey of health and healing.

Le Michif Niyanan: Returning to Michif

"Le Michif Niyanan: Returning to Michif," [14] refers to the traditional oral language of Métis,[15] which is described as a unique language composed of Aboriginal language verbs and French nouns. There is considerable regional diversity and dialectical variation within Michif, as in other Aboriginal languages, in different locations across Canada. For example, in some areas, Cree is foundational to Michif while in other areas, there is more emphasis on the French language.

> When we speak in Michif, we use some French and we use some Cree. There was one old guy that died, we were just talking about him today, they called him a French word. His name is Clement. He used to wear a suit all the time. And he wore a necktie. And he wore shoes. Most of us wore moccasins and rubbers. But he wore shoes all the time. And he used to wear a hat, a little Stetson. That's the kind of old, old, old Métis, from a long time ago, who dressed in that way. And he spoke that kind of Michif. And he called everybody, "*mon amour.*" You know what that means? It means, "my love." So that's what he called everybody. So everybody referred to him as "*mon amour.*" Whatever, it was his relationship to everybody. He spoke that language. But he also spoke our Cree, the Cree Michif that we had spoken at that time, too.
>
> To return to that language, the language is never gone, the language is always here. It's the people that have forgotten how to use that language. It's inside of each and every one of us. 'Cause we have that feeling, we have feeling inside of us already. Because it is genetic, and it is cellular. We have what you call "cellular memory." That's inside of us. We just have

14 Métis Centre @ NAHO (2007) Le Michif Niyanan: Returning to Michif. Draft in Progress. Métis Perspectives and Traditional Health Knowledge Series No. 03. Prepared by Lois Edge, Rita Flamand, Grace Zoldy, Norman Fleury, and Laura Burnouf. Ottawa.

15 Fleury, Norman (2006) Michif Language and Métis Culture. National Gatherings on Indigenous Knowledge. Canadian Heritage. Website: http://www.traditions.gc.ca/docs/docs_disc_fleury_e.cfm. Accessed January 17, 2006.

to get it out of ourselves, to evoke it, I guess. Somehow, we have to do that.

And we have to go to people who know how to speak that language. It's very difficult to learn it from a book because you don't have that energy, of that person, giving you that cellular exchange. And how you speak it, in a very gentle tone, you internalize that tone. It becomes easier to pick up. Whereas, if someone is shouting at you or talking really loud at you in a firm way, you get stressed out and it is very hard to retain anything. And, the problem with a book is that the pronunciation is not there, and neither is that energy that I am talking about.

It can be learned from a book, but one of the problems that we have today trying to learn Aboriginal languages is we are using the English structure, grammatical structure, trying to learn an Aboriginal language. And, there again, translating back and forth from a noun-based language to a verb-based language, that is the difficulty that we have.

At university when they are learning Aboriginal languages, the English-speaking students do a lot better than the Aboriginal students trying to learn their language because the English-speaking students already know the structure, so it is easier for them to write it out. And, then it is not a written language. It never has been. Syllabics was created by a Presbyterian Minister and utilized by the Priests to write their Bible to try to capture the language on paper. I am not saying there is anything wrong with it, I am just saying how I see it, from where I stand today, from an Aboriginal perspective, with an Aboriginal world view, it is different than what we might think it is.

And there is this whole idea of Michif that they are promoting right now. It comes from Manitoba and it is mixed with Ojibwe. It has a "zheh" sound. We don't have that sound back home. We have a different dialect of what you call Michif

> or Cree. Cree-sound is a very, very soft sound. And, there is probably not as much French, as those French Michif.
>
> So, that is the problem of returning to Michif, unless you have someone that is really, really promoting it, or the school is promoting it in some fashion, it will be difficult to learn for the younger people. The best way to learn is immersion programs. You have to have someone who knows how to speak it to be able to teach the children and converse with them in that language. They have CD-ROMS and stuff like that, too. But they cost money. Everything costs money. Some projects are being funded in Manitoba. I've heard that they are trying to standardize it, to make it one. And, that is kind of offensive to the people who don't speak that language, in that way, to try to speak theirs, to go and learn that one. I think that's kind of offensive, it offends me anyway. I don't want to throw my language away. It's what I grew up with, and my parents grew up with, and, my grandparents grew up with, so, I don't want to throw it away, so that's kind of a problem. I'm saying that it's good, it's good. I like to speak my language, the language of my people, from where I come from.

Indigenous knowledge, principles and laws of governance, kinship and genealogy, and teachings about our relationship to the environment are found within the Michif language. Michif may be taught during the telling of stories, singing of songs and rhymes, and sharing of observations and experience. Laughter is a big part of the Michif language. In the past, people gave one another nicknames, and sometimes an individual might be given a spiritual name. Names reflected the characteristics or gifts of an individual. A participant noted that she lives her life as Michif, as Métis she is Michif.[16] For this participant, her identity as Métis and knowledge of Michif merge together to make up the whole of her experience and life lived as Métis. Today, for many, one's identity, pride and self-esteem are strengthened and enhanced as one begins to learn and understand Michif. The fluent Michif speakers in attendance at the regional gathering on returning to Michif felt it was extremely important to provide opportunities for Michif speakers to

16 Métis Elder, Grace Zoldy. Manitoba.

share their teaching experiences with one another. The protection and promotion of the Michif language are viewed as critical to healing and wellness of Métis.

At present, there is at least one conference on the Michif language held each year. Research on Michif, development and sharing of curriculum resources and implementation of early childhood Michif immersion programs in schools with a high Métis population need be prioritized. Development of teaching resources on websites and use of multi-media are viewed as critical to the survival of the Michif language.

In 2001, approximately 2,230 people who self-identified as Métis claimed to speak or understand Michif.[17] Métis children are least likely to speak an Aboriginal language than other Aboriginal children.[18] According to the Aboriginal Peoples Survey, a majority of Métis feel Aboriginal language retention and learning are important.[19]

The experience of residential schools and issues relating to Métis identity impact the number of Michif language speakers. To pose the question, "Are you a Michif speaker?" is important as some people who self-identify as fluent Cree speakers, may, in fact, be Michif speakers. The term revitalization is interpreted not as bringing back Michif, but rather, as a return to the Michif language by Métis.

Métis Women and Family: We Got a Moose, Mom!

"Métis Women and Family: We Got a Moose, Mom!"[20] is based upon a story shared by a participant at the regional meeting on women and the family. It is one of the Elder's fondest memories as a child, prior to the loss of her mother. She recalls it being a special occasion to go hunting with her father. Upon returning home after a successful hunt, she would be first to run into the house, yelling, "We got a moose, mom!"[21] At that time, to bring home a

17 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (2001) Statistics Canada. Ottawa.

18 Aboriginal Peoples Survey (2001) Statistics Canada. Ottawa.

19 Statistics Canada (2004) A Profile of Canada's Métis Population. 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey. Ottawa.

20 Métis Centre @ NAHO (2007) Métis Women and Family: We Got a Moose, Mom! Draft in Progress. Métis Perspectives and Traditional Health Knowledge Series No. 04. Prepared by Lois Edge, Angie Crerar, Marilee Nault, Rose Boyer, Alma Desjarlais, Rose Richardson, Karon Shmon and Tricia Logan. Ottawa.

21 Métis Elder, Angie Crerar. Alberta.

moose meant the family would be supplied with food for several weeks and there would be security and well-being in the home.



Métis Women and Family. Photo by Tricia Logan. Courtesy of Métis Centre. Clockwise far left to right: Angie Crerar, Marilee Nault, Rose Boyer, Alma Desjarlais, Rose Richardson, Karen Shmon, Lois Edge. Winnipeg, Manitoba, January 2006.

These Métis women shared stories about courtship and marriage, midwifery, childbirth and parenting. They spoke of their mothers and grandmothers as their teachers and role models whose memories they continue to cherish and revere today. In describing their relationship with their mothers and grandmothers, a participant noted "the greatest thing they taught us was the importance of family life." [22]

22 Métis Elder, Angie Crerar. Alberta.

Topics of discussion included kinship, relationships, family names and histories. The importance of knowing one's relations and family genealogy is viewed as central to one's identity as Métis. The size of each participant's extended family over three generations ranged in number from thirty to fifty to over one hundred (including foster children) individuals, in sharp contrast to the size of today's smaller extended families numbering less than ten members per family over three generations. Without doubt, one's children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren are considered to be one's most valuable assets amongst these Métis Elders' Gathering participants.

Women who attended this regional gathering identified the following challenges to the health of children and youth today: drug use, abuse and/or addiction, alcohol or alcoholism in the home, gang membership, school violence or bullying, no father in the home, child abuse or family violence, sexual abuse or pedophiles, non-Aboriginal foster care, the intergenerational impact of residential school, poverty, and/or prejudice and discrimination. Contemporary issues such as Aboriginal children in foster care, gang violence, bullying, addictions, and prejudice are of great concern.

The 2001 census notes that Métis women are less likely to be employed than Métis men. The annual income of a Métis woman is about $11,000 less than a Métis man.[23]

Participants at this meeting shared memories about their families. These were mostly memories of the hardships experienced while they were growing up in poverty and experiencing the harsh realities of prejudice and discrimination as Métis. Discussions about sex education or sexuality were not a norm during their teen years during the 1940s through to the 1960s. Memories of residential school were described by one participant as "unbearable." Still today, there is tremendous grief and sorrow expressed at the mention of revisiting the pain of these experiences as children and youth.

Success stories about their experiences as role models and mentors within their families and communities were shared. All of the women were taught to contribute to the family household at an early age. Each took pride in learning how to sew. Lessons taught by their mothers and grandmothers included "never give up," "believe in yourself," "forgive and forget," "give with a good heart," and, "if you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all." It is with great pride today if a person can say they "walk their talk." Amongst this group of Métis women, there is a shared sense of pride and belonging

23 Statistics Canada (2004) A Profile of Canada's Métis Population. Ottawa.

when talking about one's spirituality and relationship of faith and trust to a higher power.

Each child is recognized as having a unique talent or special gifts. It was stressed by participants that it is up to each of us to help children to each explore and discover these talents and gifts. It was also noted that there is something for everyone to learn from the experience of failure. Listening, respect, and self-respect are considered qualities that need to be taught to children and youth to help them to survive in both worlds, to survive in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal worlds of today.

Each of the women held in common working within their communities to contribute to the health and wellness of Métis. Oftentimes these contributions are in working with children and youth. Most of the women volunteer in their communities. Some advocate on behalf of Métis rights. All note they speak up about the need for funding and resources, and, programs and services, for Métis. There is a need for the sharing of traditional cultural and health information resources amongst Elders for use in their work and respective communities.

Health of Land and Water: Every Living Thing Needs Water

"Health of Land and Water: Every Living Thing Needs Water," [24] discusses the relationship of Métis to the environment. Métis Elder's Gathering participants at this regional meeting shared stories and traditional ecological knowledge about hunting, trapping, fishing, gathering of berries and medicine plants, food preparation and preservation, and animal and bird migration. One participant talked about "listening to the land come alive" [25] with the arrival of Spring each year. They spoke of learning patience while hunting and trapping, of learning to share, not only with one's family, but within one's community, with Elders and with those less fortunate than oneself.

The teaching of chores is related to the learning of values and acceptance of responsibilities to oneself, home and one's family. All participants had fond memories of daily chores and hard work in contributing to a steady

24 Métis Centre @ NAHO (2007) Health of Land and Water: Every Living Thing Needs Water. Draft in Progress. Métis Perspectives and Traditional Health Knowledge Series No. 04. Prepared by Lois Edge, Tom McCallum, Sonny Flett, Earl Scofield, George Fleury, Marion Larkman and Jack McIvor. Ottawa.

25 Métis Elder, George Fleury. Manitoba.

supply of water and wood for their homes year round. The distinction of choices and consequences are both important lessons to be taught to children and youth. We each make choices in our lives on a daily basis, and we need give careful thought and reflection to the choices we make, as all choices have a consequence, whether positive or negative.

These participants spoke of being taught and learning to "put our mind and heart together" to attain a state of harmony and balance in one with our environment. Each spoke of a sense of harmony and balance with nature, in the environment, with the land and water, the sense of which we need each learn to incorporate into our own lives on a daily basis. Teachings about water, an essential element in life, were shared in that each of us has rights and responsibilities in working to contribute to maintaining balance and harmony on the Earth.



Health of Land and Water. Photo by Lois Edge. Courtesy of Métis Centre. Clockwise back to front, left to right: Tom McCallum, Jack McIvor, Sonny Flett, George Fleury, Marion Larkman, Earl Scofield. Winnipeg, Manitoba. January 2006.

A participant shared a number of photographs taken while hunting and trapping in the Athabasca River Basin area in northeastern Alberta during

the 1960s prior to the building of the Bennett Dam in British Columbia.[26] At that time, muskrat trapping was a common livelihood when there were approximately one hundred thousand muskrats in the Delta. In 2005, there were only a few remaining. The photographs show a trapper with hundreds of stretched muskrats. Ducks and geese were also plentiful back then, numbering in the hundreds of thousands. Those numbers have decreased considerably today. A caribou hunt shows the use of all parts of the caribou and enough meat to contribute to several households in the community. Today, there are even fewer caribou in the region.

The importance of Aboriginal languages as central to helping us to understand our relationship to the land and water was stressed. For example, learning the days of the months in Michif helps us to understand the cycle of the seasons, environmental changes, bird and animal migrations, and availability of food sources. To learn the language is to develop a stronger relationship with the land and water.

The practices of traditional ceremonies and protocols such as the offering of tobacco and gathering and preparation of medicine plants for healing is seen as fundamental to the well-being of our spirituality and critical in contributing to the renewal of life on Earth. To participate in ceremonies is to strengthen our relationship with the land and water.

Participants recognize that today there are many factors that are contributing to the destruction of the environment and pollution of water. Environmental contaminants, herbicides and pesticides, oil and gas development, forestry and logging, and global warming are each identified as stressors to the environment.

Learning the skills to survive on the land is considered as contributing to the health and well-being of Youth and those involved in the criminal justice system. Learning a sense of responsibility to one's self and one's community and gaining a better understanding of the relationship of choices to consequences are seen as valuable teachings that enhance wellness.

These participants said it is up to each of us, as human beings, to find our spirit in listening to and respecting the memories of our ancestors, and those who came before us, to our parents and grandparents, and to the Elders in our communities, for future generations who are yet to come.

The challenges of urban life, especially for young Métis, are great. One way to help Youth today is to bring them out on the land, to teach them

26 Métis Elder, Sonny Flett, Alberta.

survival and Youth leadership skills and qualities through practical hands-on learning experiences. Youth need to be taught to be the best they can be in order to survive as bi-cultural in the multi-cultural world of today.

One of the participant's five-year old grandson drew a picture of vehicles and buildings, showing puffs of pollution. He asked his grandmother to please bring the picture to the meeting to show the people that pollution is affecting the health of the land and the water.

Conclusion

The facilitation of Métis Elders' Gatherings by a Métis researcher provided an opportunity for Métis Elders, seniors and healers from across Canada to come together to share their knowledge, experiences and wisdom. A reciprocal exchange of knowledge and information allowed for participants to more effectively contribute to health and healing in their own communities. At the final Métis Elders' Gathering in July of 2006, the group reached a shared understanding that each of the participants are, in their own way as



Métis Elders Gathering. Photo by Tricia Logan. Courtesy of Métis Centre. Left to right: Sonny Flett, Tom McCallum, Michael Maurice, Alma Desjarlais, Albert Desjarlais. Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. July 2006.

individuals and in their respective communities, each both leaders and healers. These qualities and abilities are strengthened in the opportunity to come together and form new relationships with other Elders, seniors and healers.

Respect is considered as an important principle contributing to Métis health and healing — respect in listening, in a willingness to learn and better understand our relationships with others, to change and to grow, to respect our environments, ourselves and each other.

> The life that we have lived as a Métis person is what we believe a Métis to be about, but when someone comes along and says, here are some other things, here are some concepts of Métis-ness, it stirs something inside a person. You mean to tell me, the life I have lived is not who I am, who I am, is not who I am? It is questions like this that pop up. And some people are very, very adamant, their pride is so ingrained in them, the way that they have lived, who they are and what they are, are important to them, too. It's true. And, when someone comes along and says to them, the language is very, very important. Without the language, you are missing them. And it hurt some people who don't know the language. And this stirred up a hornet's nest sometimes.
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> It was very, very much of a learning experience. And, a lot of people, of what you call the Métis Elders group had very little understanding of what most people call Native spirituality. They thought Métis were strictly Catholic, that's all Métis were, there was nothing else. But, a lot of Métis practiced that way. It only makes sense that the people who are Catholic are the French. Those are the ones that brought parts of it over here.
>
> But what happened to the Native spirituality, is the women who came from that culture, did they throw their culture away? No. They practiced their culture, they showed their husbands that culture and that's how those French people survived. Without the Métis, or Native women, they never would have survived. They would have starved. They didn't

know how to survive in the woods. They didn't know the roots, or where to go. It was the women that showed them that. So, that culture was very, very strong. And, some of them saw that, and they practiced it, especially the offspring. They learned how to trap, they learned how to survive in the bush. They knew what to look for, when a storm was coming, when not to go anywhere, they knew how to do that, how to start a fire when they didn't have anything, what to start it with. All of that, they had all of that knowledge, this was being taught.

At the different gatherings that we had, we were talking a lot about that. I knew some people started to be offended. Especially that one time we were in Morley, that one Elder brought out that staff, that talking stick. People didn't want to touch it. They said, that's not my way. Because they had no understanding of what it was about. They had a pre-conceived notion that this was done by what we call today's Indians.

In fact, its part of who we are, that's part of it, and we have very little understanding about it. That's part of it. We have more understanding of the European culture than we do about our Aboriginal culture. And, we have to have a good understanding of the two, to be able to make an informed decision about what it is you really want to do.

We can only learn from history, the time we live in, learn from history to make that choice today, so that future generations can benefit, to be balanced in the world and in ourselves.

Those are the things that came up for me that I try to share with other people. I think some people saw I was not trying to say, my way is right and yours is wrong, it was that, consider in your view that this may be of assistance to you, to broaden your perspective of our knowledge of our people. And that is, that Métis did have sweat lodges, and they

did practice physical medicines themselves, and they knew how the animals moved in the forest. And that's how they sustained themselves. They had to know where those animals bedded at night, they knew where they went and ate, what their habits were, and how they moved around on that land. And, when they were going to bed down. And that did not come from the French, it came from the Aboriginal side, that's where that came from. And, that was a real learning curve for everybody.

And the language itself, it was an upset, because there were a lot of people who didn't know the language. It was kind of like a sore spot for people. It was like, are you telling me that because I don't know my language, I am not Métis? Well, that is not what it was about. Not at all. It was again, once again, about broadening our perspective, to try to teach our children to have a world view, to have peripheral vision as opposed to a binocular vision.

I think it was very, very educational. All that you have written and documented and everything we have done will be passed on. And, these are the kind of things that you have done yourself. There's so much that you have done, there is so much going to be passed on, or be kept in a place where people can access it, so that they also can have the opportunity to be able to see. So you have opened many, many doorways, not only from the past, but to the future, to what is coming behind us. You were instrumental in doing that. Because of you, you're tenacious, and your vision. In utilizing me, when you called the Elders, assisting you in realizing that, which is the same thing that we wanted to do, too, but we never had anybody at the helm, to be able to initiate, to do all of this that you are doing, it was wonderful, to have someone like you. That's a bit of what you did.

In a more specific way, the Métis cookbook that we put together, that was a great big hit. And, the calendar. And, there

> is always a start, you start from something. Like that, and then it opens up a doorway. And people will ask for more stuff, and then, more, more, more and more. And, you have everything there at your fingertips. You know how to access it, you know how to access Elders now, you know where to go to get that information. You are very, very instrumental. You are a bridge, a bridge to the future. That's the love that I learned from the work that you have done, you and Trish and Michael. Don't forget the last part that I have said, about your work, and the work that you have done. You have to put it in. It's very important.

Project recommendations thus far include hosting of future Métis Elders' Gatherings and activities to facilitate opportunities to bring together Métis Elders, healers and seniors at the national, regional and community levels. Current participants have also expressed a keen interest in hosting regional gatherings in each of their respective regions to engage with Elderly Métis at the regional and community levels. Project participants expressed an interest in bringing Elders and Youth together on the land, to teach Youth leadership and survival skills and abilities that will help Youth to be the best they can be to survive the many challenges they face today as bi-cultural in a multi-cultural world. The Métis Centre is encouraged to continue to build relationships, develop partnerships, access resources and continue these types of initiatives working with Métis Elders in the future.

In 2001, the median age of Métis in Canada was twenty-seven years. Over half of Métis were under twenty-five years of age. Fewer than seven percent of Métis are over age sixty years and there is a decrease of close to six percent in Métis after the age of forty-nine years. These figures suggest that it is imperative for Métis in the age ranges over forty years of age to learn from the Métis Elders, seniors and healers of today. Each Métis Elder, senior or healer holds knowledge that will certainly contribute to the health and wellness of future generations. There is an urgency to bring together Métis in the forty-five to sixty year old age range to meet with and work together with Métis Elders to begin to learn about roles and responsibilities in becoming a role model and teaching younger Métis in future about individual and community health and wellness.

Limitations to this project included a need for a long-term commitment in working with Elderly Métis, a lack of sustainable funding (ie project dependent), competition for available limited resources, competing Métis health priorities, a focus on physical health-only issues or national priorities, and a consistent turnover in decision-makers at the national level. Primary limitations include a basic lack of awareness concerning Indigenous principles and values and in striving to maintain the integrity of the translation and interpretation of Indigenous knowledge into the Canadian/English language and culture framework.

The Métis Elders Gatherings generated a number of ideas that contributed directly to the development of several health information and public education materials by the Métis Centre, including a Métis Centre webpage, brochure and meeting kit, a Michif language brochure, several promotional items, a very popular 2005/6 Calendar depicting names of the months in Michif, Cree, French and English, and the Métis Cookbook and Guide to Healthy Living. Next steps for the Métis Elders' Gathering initiative include publication of the Métis Perspectives and Traditional Health Knowledge Series booklets on health and healing, Michif language, Métis women and family, and land and water, currently under development. In addition, a final report will address project methodology and management, knowledge translation and interpretation, and related conclusions and recommendations.

The Métis Centre at the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) is dedicated to improving the mental, physical, spiritual, emotional and social health of Métis people in Canada through the advancement and sharing of knowledge in the field of Métis health. It is a fundamental belief of the Métis Centre that this approach is key to empowering Métis in Canada. Objectives of the Métis Centre include the facilitation and promotion of research, to develop research partnerships, and, to affirm and protect traditional health knowledge and healing practices. Métis health and wellness is believed to be founded in Métis culture, identity and traditional knowledge, evidenced in Métis history and experiences, shared through storytelling, and dependent upon the health of the land and water, and people's relationship with the environment.[27]

27 Métis Centre @ NAHO (2002) Review of Métis Health Policy Forum Proceedings. Prepared by Lois Edge. Website: http://www.naho.ca/MHC_Site/B/review.html. Accessed July 15, 2006.

Contributors

Lois Edge is currently Senior Research Officer with the Métis Centre at the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO). She holds a Master of Arts degree in social and cultural Anthropology and is pursuing doctoral studies with the Department of Educational Policy Studies with a specialization in Indigenous Peoples Education at the University of Alberta. Lois is Gwich'in/Cree Métis from Fort Smith, Northwest Territories and currently resides in Edmonton, Alberta.

Tom McCallum is Cree-Métis born in Isle-a-la Crosse, Saskatchewan. He studied Business Management at the Gabriel Dumont Institute, Native Studies at the University of Saskatchewan, and Social Sciences at the University of Victoria. He currently resides in Maple Ridge, British Columbia and works as an Elder/traditional cultural facilitator working with parents, children and families. Tom is a storyteller and a practitioner of the art of oral transmission of Indigenous knowledge.