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An Evaluation of the Healing Our Spirit Worldwide Conference 2006

Cheryl L. Currie
University of Alberta

Patti LaBoucane-Benson
University of Alberta

Nancy Gibson
University of Alberta

Correspondence: Cheryl Currie
Addiction and Mental Health Research Laboratory
University of Alberta
13-133 Clinical Sciences Building
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2T3
e-mail: cheryl.currie@ualberta.ca
phone: 780.492.6757
fax: 780.492.0364

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Abstract

To date, published information about methodologies used to measure the outcomes of conferences and related forums has been sparse. This article describes the evaluation of the 5th *Healing Our Spirit Worldwide Gathering*, a five-day conference on Aboriginal health and healing that was held in Edmonton in 2006. The authors describe the outcome-focused objectives of the evaluation, the instruments developed to measure these outcomes, the methods used to collect information, and the success of these methods (e.g., participation rates). Next, the findings of the evaluation are presented, followed by the strengths and limitations of the evaluation and suggestions for improvement at future events.

Introduction

To date, published information about the methodology used to measure the impact of conferences and related forums and the lessons learned from these experiences has been sparse. This article describes the evaluation of a five-day conference on Aboriginal health and healing. The methodology presented here, as well as its resulting strengths and limitations, may be of use to evaluators working to develop evaluation strategies to measure the success of various public forums. The findings presented may also be of use to planners of future Aboriginal health-related events.

This paper is a condensed version of a full evaluation report that was completed for the 5th *Healing Our Spirits Worldwide* (HOSW) Conference that took place August 6–11, 2006 in Edmonton, Alberta. The HOSW movement began as one person's vision to create an international forum focused on the alcohol and drug abuse issues and programs in Indigenous communities throughout the global community. The first gathering was held in Edmonton in 1992. Subsequent gatherings were held in Sydney Australia (1994), Rotorua Aotearoa New Zealand (1998) and Albuquerque New Mexico (2002). In August 2006, the HOSW movement returned to Edmonton. Hundreds of Indigenous community members from Canada and to a lesser extent the US, Latin America, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa attended.

HOSW 2006 was organized by the International Indigenous Council (IIC), an international body of members responsible for overseeing the ongoing work of the *Healing Our Spirit Worldwide* movement, the selection of future Gathering sites, supporting conference hosts and building an international conference network. Members of the IIC are appointed based on

records of their international indigenous involvement and their contribution to the health and healing of indigenous communities. The Council is currently represented by members from Canada, the US, Latin America, Australia and New Zealand. Decisions made by the IIC were actualized by the Conference Planning Committee made up of representatives from key stakeholders and funding partners.

Purpose

The purpose of this evaluation was first, to produce an objective and methodologically sound appraisal of the overall outcomes and impact of the conference and second, to provide information that can be used to guide the planning and implementation of the next HOSW Gathering. With these goals in mind, the framework of this evaluation was developed and refined in consultation with the Conference Planning Committee and related key stakeholders. This evaluation was structured to provide feedback on the achievements and shortcomings of the conference as related to the eight over-arching objectives of the event including:

1. Did the Gathering further the development of the Covenant that began at the 4th Gathering in 2002 for Indigenous people to use in their respective countries?
2. Did the Gathering help attendees to recognize the importance of traditional healers and medicine in our history, recovery and wellness?
3. Did the Gathering create a network for substance abuse healers working in Indigenous communities throughout the world?
4. Did the Gathering provide a forum for Indigenous leaders to work with Governments on issues related to health, healing and self-determination?
5. Did the Gathering provide a statement from Indigenous people to world governments about Indigenous healing, health and governance?
6. Did the Gathering provide a forum for Indigenous community members, youth and Elders to connect and share their challenges and strategies for success?
7. Did the Gathering strengthen the movement towards healing, healthy and self-determining Indigenous communities throughout the world?

8. Did the Gathering enable the development of policy and research papers to be shared with the world Indigenous community in the areas identified as critical to health, healing and self-determination?

Methods

It was recognized early that a single collection of data would not provide an adequate picture of the overall conference in relation to its eight stated objectives. Thus, data were collected from three target groups including session attendees, speakers, and conference participants. Overall, 2,115 session, 107 speaker and 124 overall evaluations were completed. All information collected was anonymous.[1]

Measures

Measures for each were developed in consultation with the Conference Planning Committee and other key stakeholders. Surveys for session attendees, speakers, and general conference members included both structured and unstructured questions (see Appendix A). As well, all target groups surveys included plenty of room for open comments as a way to allow issues identified during the evaluation to be given fair weight.

Data Collection and Analysis

Session Evaluations

Adult session evaluations were collected via paper-and-pencil surveys that were distributed to audience members in each session and collected by session track chairs. Evaluations took approximately 5 minutes to complete. In total, 2,115 evaluations were completed by participants attending sessions. While it is difficult to estimate this response rate, the large number of evaluations completed across sessions suggests these findings are likely robust and representative of most participants at the conference.

Sessions were also offered separately to youth participants aged 13–24. A total of 53 session evaluations were completed by youth in these sessions, resulting in a sample that may not represent the experiences and opinions of all youth who participated in the program. Nevertheless, the findings, and especially the comments by youth provide information about the value of the

1 For descriptive purposes, some direct quotes contain demographic information about respondents (e.g., country of origin, occupation). Such information was not provided by all participants.

program for youth and shed light on ways to further improve the quality of future youth-oriented sessions.

Speaker Evaluations

Speaker evaluations were collected via paper-and-pencil surveys distributed to speakers in each session and collected by session track chairs. Evaluations took approximately 5 minutes to complete. In total, 107 of the 314 speakers at the conference provided an evaluation of their experiences, resulting in a response rate of 34% which suggests we can be fairly confident the findings represent the views of most speakers at the conference.

Overall Evaluations

Overall evaluations were collected from general conference participants by a four-member interview team who conducted one-on-one interviews with randomly selected attendees in the lobbies and resting areas of the adult site, youth site and the market place. Overall evaluation interviews began on the third day to give delegates time to form impressions about the conference. Interviewers were selected based on their familiarity with specific Aboriginal populations. One interviewer conducted interviews with Elders and another with youth, while the remaining two conducted interviews with the main body of participants. To overcome possible literacy barriers all survey questions were read to participants. Interviewers explained the purpose of the evaluation and gained informed verbal consent before proceeding. Those who agreed to participate received a small gift (a conference-embossed stationery set). Most participants approached were happy to take part in the survey. Approximately 15% of those approached refused to participate resulting in a response rate of 85%. Most typically, those who refused were getting ready to go to a session or other meeting and did not have time.

Each interview was approximately 10–15 minutes in length. Efforts were made to gather diverse perspectives by interviewing a wide variety of delegates (e.g., individuals from different countries, Elders, youth, individuals with special needs). These face-to-face interviews allowed for the expression of individual reflections that might have been missed on paper surveys.

Demographic information was collected from participants who took part in this part of the evaluation. Overall, 62% were female and the average age was 40–59 years: 14% were under 20 years, 17% were 20–39 years, 54% were 40–59 years and 15% were over 59 years. More than two-thirds (69%) were from Canada, 22% were from Australia or New Zealand, 6% were from the

US and 1% were from China. In total, 86% of those interviewed were of Indigenous ancestry and 77% were first-time attendees. As well, 44% identified themselves as community health care workers, 26% identified themselves as Indigenous leaders and 23% identified themselves as healers. Responses to the overall survey yielded no significant demographic differences.

Data Analysis

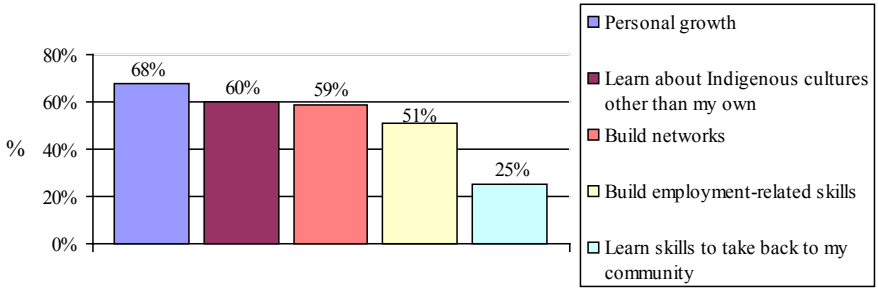
Quantitative data, including frequencies and cross tabulations, were analyzed using SPSS software. Qualitative data were examined using a thematic analysis.

Findings

Motivation for Attending the Conference

As shown in Figure 1, most people attended the conference for personal growth, to learn about Indigenous cultures other than their own and network with others. More than half (51%) also attended to build employment-related skills. While people were not asked if they had attended the conference to learn skills to take back to their community, 25% volunteered this information when asked if they had attended for any other reason, suggesting the actual percentage of people who attended to learn skills to take back to their community is likely much higher.

Figure 1. Motivation for Attending HOSW 2006



Adult Sessions

There were 138 sessions at the conference covering 22 topic areas. A total of 2,115 evaluations were completed by participants attending these sessions. Audience members were asked about the relevance of information presented

in sessions. The results were highly favorable (Table 1), with the large majority of participants indicating the sessions were valuable both to themselves personally and in the work they do. There was also clear agreement that the topics covered within each session were critical to Indigenous people.

Table 1. Quality of Information Shared during Sessions

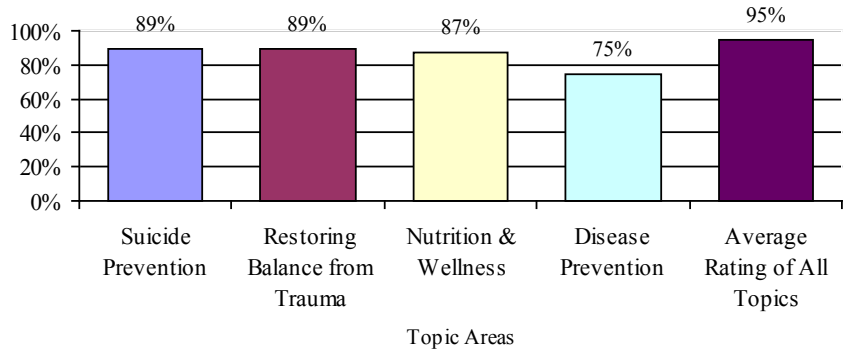
	Agree or Strongly Agree	*Sample Size*
Session topic is critical to Indigenous people	97%	2,015
Session was valuable to me personally	95%	2,201
Session was valuable in the work I do	90%	2,014

It is clear that overall, participants were very happy with the quality of information presented in sessions, most of which received overall audience approval ratings of 90% or more (i.e., 90% of audience members rated the session as good or excellent). In this regard, some comments from participants included:

- "This was the best and the most informative Aboriginal teaching I've ever received."
- "It is awesome to see how similar our traditions and values are with people as far away as New Zealand."
- "Very informative — it gives me the incentive to pursue something for the youth on my reservation."
- "Very relevant to me as a primary health care community health nurse working on a First Nations reserve."
- "I have enjoyed the sessions the most. I was here feeling like an outsider as a non-Aboriginal healer — then I went to a session and it was amazing. The speaker was so real about his life and struggles. The respect for non-Aboriginal people was amazing. After the session, I felt like I could better use Aboriginal teachings." (Outpost Nurse, Canada)

Information was collected on 21 of the 22 tracks at the conference, 17 of which received an average audience approval rating of 95%. As shown in Figure 2, there were four topic areas that received ratings that were significantly and consistently lower across their respective sessions, including suicide prevention, restoring balance from trauma and violence, nutrition and wellness, and disease prevention.

Figure 2. Percentage of Audience Rating Sessions within Specific Topic Areas as Good/Excellent



These findings suggest future conferences might strive to improve the quality of papers presented in these four areas. Future conferences should work to attract speakers who can present innovative community-level ideas and interventions backed by applied follow-up evaluative research within these four topic areas. Advertising might be the best way to accomplish this. The call for papers for the next event might advertise a special interest in abstracts that deal with one or more of these four topics. Other constructive comments from audience members included the following:

- "More interactive sessions, otherwise the information is just being given to you — you're not working with it." (Social Worker, Canada)
- "Stories were most meaningful. Some 'experts' programs were a mixed bag — some used it as an opportunity to drum up business." (Canada)
- "I would like to see speakers' abstracts and PowerPoint presentations on CD free to all participants." (Indigenous leader, Australia)
- "[We should go] to see other organizations in the community as a field trip." (Australia)

Youth Sessions

The youth track provided education sessions to help youth enhance their leadership skills, develop a strong voice and set goals to create a healthier world for future generations. These workshops, open to participants aged 13–24 years, were designed for Aboriginal youth by Elders to enable young people from different parts of the world to meet, learn and develop friendships in a safe, fun and interactive environment.

Overall, 95% of youth rated the sessions they attended as good or excellent. As well, most thought the topics discussed were valuable to themselves personally and critical to Indigenous people (Table 2).

Table 2. Quality of Information Shared during Youth Sessions

	Agree or Strongly Agree	*Sample Size*
Session was valuable to me personally	86%	53
Session topic is critical to Indigenous people	78%	46
Session was valuable in the work I do	65%	51

Positive comments by youth about the sessions included:

- "I really like the youth programs. They gave me a place to learn and feel safe about Aboriginal culture." (Youth, Canada)
- "I learned not to be so hard on myself, trust my own instincts, pass on what I learn — be more verbal." (Youth, Canada)
- "It was nice to see that Indigenous cultures all over the world can all be the same at heart." (Youth, Canada)

Youth also provided constructive comments to further improve future sessions, including the following:

- "More testimony-type workshops." (Youth, Canada)
- "More variety of activities; like learning and doing the cultural activities." (Youth, Australia)
- "[There was] not much on language. My parents lost theirs when taken to residential schools. I was hoping to learn about that and how language was affected." (Youth, Canada)
- "Youth and their role in society. [There were] no workshops directly addressing this issue." (Youth, Canada)

Comments by Adults about the Youth Program

Adults at the conference were also impressed that youth and their issues were so much a part of the event. As noted by one health care worker:

- "The message is getting out there to get our youth active. They have taken a great length to get them involved. Too often they get forgotten." (Health care worker, Canada)

However, some adults expressed disappointment that youth sessions were in a facility separate from adults and that youth were not further encouraged to participate in the main body of conference activities:

- "The youth programs have been taken away from the main body of the conference. Youth are the leaders of tomorrow, and if that is so than they should be incorporated into the main building." (Health care worker, New Zealand)
- "[The opening ceremony] was absolutely beautiful and exhilarating. I was disappointed to see the lack of youth. There should be ceremonies designated for the youth to encourage them to participate." (Canada)
- "The older children missed the plenaries — I would have liked to have them there to hear the speakers." (Australia)

Speaker Evaluations

Overall, speakers were happy with the support that was provided to them by conference staff, with most agreeing or strongly agreeing that registering for the conference was straightforward, they were provided with the tools they needed to feel organized and prepared for their presentation, and that the conference was well-organized (Table 3). As stated by one of the speakers:

- "I loved my experience of speaking at the conference and felt very well looked after."

Table 3. Evaluation of the Conference by Speakers

	Agree or Strongly Agree	*Sample Size*
I was provided tools I needed to feel organized	93%	102
Speaker registration was straightforward	92%	99
The conference is well organized	90%	105
Session was an appropriate length	89%	99
Rooms and seating were appropriate	86%	100

Overall Conference Evaluation

Overall evaluations were collected from 124 randomly selected attendees at the conference using a face-to-face interview format. When asked about the overall relevance of the information they were learning at various events at the conference including keynote speeches, workshops, evening activities,

lunch hour activities and ceremonies; the large majority of participants indicated the information they were learning was valuable both to themselves personally and to the work they do (Table 4). There was also clear agreement that topics covered were critical to Indigenous people and that the conference was strengthening the movement toward healing Indigenous communities.

Table 4. Percentage of Participants Who Agreed/Strongly Agreed with Statements about the Overall Quality of the Conference

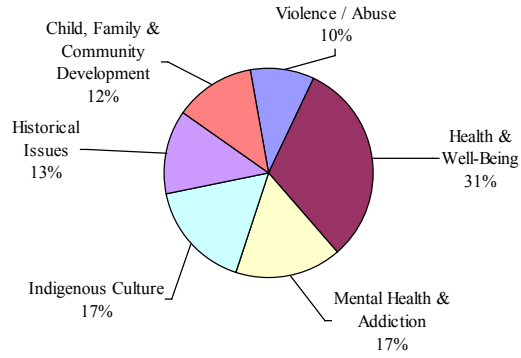
	Agree or Strongly Agree	*Sample Size*
Information I am learning is valuable to me personally	97%	122
Information I am learning is valuable in the work I do	96%	110
The topics covered are critical to Indigenous peoples	96%	121
The conference has strengthened the movement toward healing Indigenous communities	94%	116
My expectations for this conference were met	88%	122

These results compliment similar findings reported by delegates evaluating individual sessions and present an overall picture of a fruitful and successful conference. Most delegates (88%) agreed their expectations for the conference had been met and the general feeling among participants was that nothing offered was poor or should be taken away, but that there were specific areas that could be even further improved at future events.

Topic Areas of Greatest Interest to Attendees

As shown in Figure 3, *health and well-being* was the area that participants were most interested in learning about at the conference. Within this broad area, participants were most interested in learning about diabetes, diet and nutrition, stress and relaxation, restoring a sense of balance and spiritual growth.

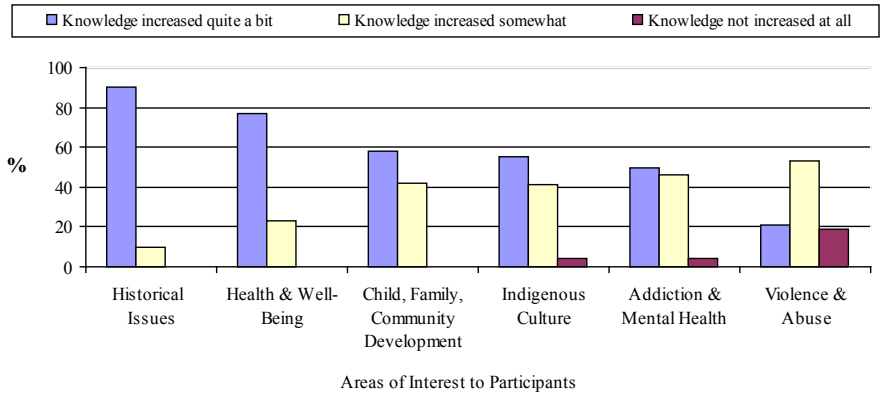
Figure 3. Topic Areas Participants were most Interested in Learning about at the Conference



The next most common responses were addiction and mental health and Indigenous culture. The 17% of participants who wanted to learn about *addiction and mental health* were most interested in suicide prevention and problems with smoking, alcohol, drugs and gambling. The 17% of participants who stated they wanted to learn about *Indigenous culture* were most interested in traditional healing, Elder's traditional knowledge, Aboriginal cultures other than their own, language, song, ceremonial protocols and self-identity. The 13% who wanted to learn about *historical issues* were interested in the history of Aboriginal peoples, past traumas such as colonization and residential schools and how to get over such issues. The 12% interested in *child, family and community development* issues wanted to learn about self governance models, how Aboriginals can work with non-Aboriginals and how people are dealing with problems related to homelessness, parenting, education, youth and the environment. Finally, the 10% interested in *violence and abuse issues* wanted to learn more about lateral violence, domestic violence, gang violence and sexual abuse.

Overall, 60% of participants stated their knowledge about their areas of interest had increased quite a bit as a result of the information they were learning at the conference, 37% stated their knowledge had increased somewhat and 3% stated their knowledge had not increased at all. As shown in Figure 4, participants who had attended the conference to learn about historical issues were particularly pleased with the information they had gained, with 90% stating the conference had increased their knowledge on this topic area quite a bit.

Figure 4. Responses to the Question "Do you feel you have increased your knowledge in areas you were most interested in learning about as a result of attending this conference?"



- "I was shocked and sad to see how my people were treated. It gave me a better understanding of them and compassion for the problems we experience today." (Youth, Australia)

Participants who attended the conference to learn about health and well-being were also quite happy with the information they had gained, with 77% stating their knowledge had increased quite a bit and 23% stating their knowledge had increased somewhat. Participants who had attended the conference to learn about culture; addiction and mental health; and/or child, family and community health were less satisfied with the knowledge they had gained. Only half indicated the conference had increased their knowledge of these topic areas substantially. Those who were most disappointed were participants who had attended the conference to learn about violence and abuse, with almost three-quarters (72%) indicating their knowledge had been increased only somewhat or not at all.

Given these findings, it is recommended that at future conferences, the number of speakers presenting papers on Indigenous culture; addiction and mental health; child, family and community health; and especially, violence and abuse issues be increased. As noted previously, advertising an interest in specific themes as part of the call for papers might be the best way to attract speakers that deal with these, and other specific issues. As stated by one participant:

- "If you advertised about drugs, alcohol and mental health you would get more people. Also we would have been sponsored to come here." (Canada)

Networking Opportunities

One of the objectives of HOSW 2006 was to provide a forum for Indigenous community members, youth and Elders to connect and share their challenges and strategies for success. Overall, 93% of participants stated the conference has provided a place for Indigenous people to share their challenges and strategies for success and that enough opportunities had been provided at the forum to meet and talk with other people. In total, 83% stated they had made important connections at the conference and 75% said they will contact the people they have met after the conference was over. Suggestions to further improve networking among conference participants included:

1. More seating in hallways and corridors
2. Longer breaks

3. A bigger conference venue
4. Keeping all sessions and workshops (youth and adult) in the same building

Networking among Indigenous Leaders and Government

One of the objectives of HOSW 2006 was to create opportunities for Indigenous leaders and governments to talk together about important issues. Conference organizers set up a special meeting room at a nearby hotel so that Indigenous leaders could meet with governments to discuss health, healing and self-determination issues. Of the 124 participants interviewed 32 were Indigenous leaders. Some interviews suggest this meeting room combined with information obtained from sessions were useful to some leaders. As noted by two individuals:

- "Yes, will write a submission on inhalant abuse based on what I heard here and with the support I will get from here — I will have a framework." (Indigenous Leader, Australia).
- "Yes — I got ideas on my programs — I got the confidence and strength to pursue them." (Indigenous Leader, Australia).

However, overall only 16% reported the conference had provided them with the opportunity to meet with other leaders and with government, suggesting few leaders were aware of the meeting room and/or this arrangement was not suitable. To increase the likelihood that Indigenous leaders will have the opportunity to meet and work with governments, it is recommended that specific information about meeting rooms and meeting times be communicated to Indigenous leaders both in their registration packages and during each day's opening announcements.

Networking among Community Health Care Workers and Healers

One of the objectives of HOSW 2006 was to create networks between health care workers and healers working in Indigenous communities. Of the 124 participants interviewed 60 were health care workers or healers. These individuals were asked if the conference had helped them meet others doing similar work in Indigenous communities. Overall, 32% of health care workers and 17% of healers said the conference had provided them with these opportunities. Some of their comments include:

- "There are so many similarities between different Aboriginal cultures, and we have so many common issues — we are learning from each other here." (Health care worker, Canada)
- "I met addiction counselors from Australia, New Zealand and Canada." (Addictions Worker, Canada)
- "The conference overall has been an important experience for myself. The people have been friendly and open. They have shared their life stories with me as I have with them." (Youth community worker, Australia)

To further increase the likelihood that individuals working in similar fields will have opportunities to meet one another and exchange ideas, participants suggested a specific meeting be held for health care workers and healers working in Indigenous communities. Participants envisioned this meeting would be approximately one hour and would provide a meet-and-greet atmosphere, and possibly coffee/snacks, with a track chair providing some group leadership to help people better engage with one another.

It was suggested the meeting be held near the beginning of the conference, so that individuals could become acquainted and then continue to share ideas and experiences for the remainder of the gathering. If such a meeting was not possible, participants suggested a room be set aside that health care workers and healers could share (i.e., something similar to the room set aside for Elders) to make it more likely that individuals would have the opportunity to meet one another during the rest periods between sessions.

- "[We need] a venue to do networking. There's lots of shuffling from place to place." (Health care worker, Canada)
- "It would be great if they could have a little meeting area for community workers to talk or a time to get together where community workers could exchange ideas."
- "People could call their own meetings — have impromptu meetings — info on bulletin boards — people add their names. Have a message board — folders with people's names on them." (Health care worker, Australia)

Conference Environment

Participants were very happy with key elements of the conference program including the Elder's gatherings, sessions, evening activities, youth and children's programs and the marketplace. Participants commented that to further improve the marketplace future events should provide individuals

the opportunity to trade items in an organized way. As stated by one participant:

- "Have a place where people can trade things. Some people were told to bring things to trade but did not know how to go about it." (Youth, Australia)

Participants also appreciated the communal, positive and inspiring environment created by conference organizers, track chairs, keynotes and other speakers at the event and many people felt it was important that the mindset and spirit of the conference was carried on to future events:

- "The atmosphere of celebrating success and progress should not be changed at future conferences. A real positive attitude — rather than talking about how bad it is." (Canada)
- "This conference is inspiring — to see so many good things happening in Aboriginal communities at the same time. As a health care worker, it can get depressing, you start to feel like you will never make a difference." (Health care worker, Canada)
- "The leaders/Elders — how they spoke — it's not by anger." (Healer, New Zealand)
- "Being around people from all over the world with a common vision has given me so much hope." (Mental health worker, Canada
- "As an Elder, I feel so good walking around meeting all kinds of people. Some know me and some don't but they all shake my hand and call me *Kookum*." (Canada)
- "Hearing that our problems are all the same — [I have] more appreciation of the unity in our struggles." (Indigenous Leader, Australia)

Participants noted that while they were grateful for the refreshments provided between sessions, many would like to see small snacks offered at future events. Participants who were particularly interested in this idea were seniors and those with chronic illnesses such as diabetes. Participants also commented that the variety of healthy snacks and lunch items offered for purchase on site needs to be expanded at future conferences. Comments from participants include the following:

- "For older people it is a long day. I like that there is free bottled water but I wish small snacks were offered between sessions. It would help seniors and diabetics a lot." (Retired community health care worker, Canada)

- "I'm thankful for the tea, coffee, and water, but this is a health conference — so healthy food should have been provided." (Healer, New Zealand)
- Nutrition and disease prevention is societal. It is ironic that the only food available is hot dogs and doesn't go with the spirit of the conference (Canada).

Participants also suggested that hands-on healers, such as massage therapists, reflexologists and energy healers, be available for delegates to make use of at the conference. Participants stated they were weary from travel and sessions and such healers would make a big difference, especially to seniors and individuals with chronic illnesses concerned about their circulation after sitting in sessions for long periods. Participants noted that healers should be spread throughout the conference and should be easy to locate in the common areas frequented by participants between sessions. Comments from delegates included the following:

- "Massage, more hands on traditional healers." (New Zealand)
- "At a big conference like this, it would be good to have energy healers and acupuncturists on hand that people can go to — to relax and feel energized." (Elder, Canada)

Experiences at Ceremony

One of the objectives of HOSW 2006 was to help attendees recognize the importance of traditional healers and medicine in Indigenous history, recovery and wellness. While there were many sessions that discussed traditional healing and medicine, one of the best ways to recognize their importance in recovery and wellness is through direct experience. Conference participants had the opportunity to actively participate in the opening ceremony, smudging, pipe ceremonies and nightly sweat lodges. A total of 88 participants interviewed (71%) had participated in these events and in their interviews often described their experiences as "spiritual and moving." In fact, the inclusion of ceremonies at the conference, and in particular the multi-cultural opening ceremony, were the most commonly cited activities that participants would like to see continued at future conferences.

Participants made the following comments about their experiences:

- "Mentally and spiritually, the opening ceremonies were very moving." (Health care worker, Australia)

- "The traditional ceremonies were beautiful — the traditional outfits — Australians coming together." (Indigenous Leader, Australia).
- "It's like a feeling of being wanted and being part of it." (Maori Elder, New Zealand)
- "Smudging — was excellent — gave me a sense of inner peace — I felt a lot clearer when I came out." (Australia)
- "I lived with a pipe carrier. It's nice to see that being carried on by the next generation." (Elder, Canada)

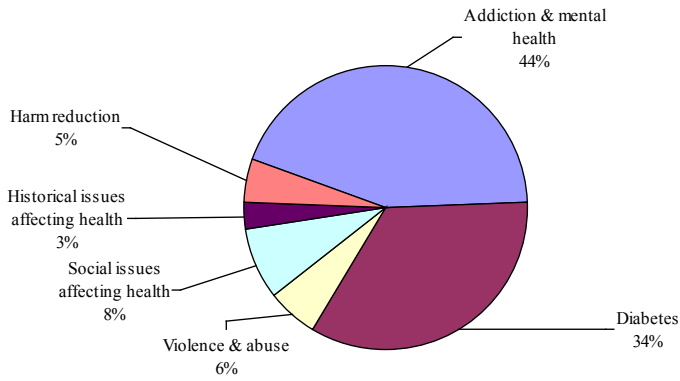
During evaluation interviews, several participants from countries other than Canada commented that protocols necessary for women to partake in some ceremonies were not communicated before they arrived, and some were disappointed they did not bring clothing appropriate to take part in some of these events (for example, long skirts to take part in the sweat lodges). As stated by one participant:

- "I would like more information prior to the conference about protocols so that we bring appropriate clothing for ceremonies." (Indigenous leader, Australia)

Health Priorities in Indigenous Communities

Finally, to further supplement information provided to HOSW 2010, participants from different countries were asked what the health priorities were in their communities (as part of the face-to-face interviews). The most common responses fell into two categories: (1) addiction and mental health and (2) diabetes (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Categories of Responses to the Question "What are the health priorities in your community?"



Within the area of *addiction/mental health* specific priorities commented on by participants were general mental health as well as problems with drugs, alcohol, gambling and fetal alcohol syndrome. As stated by participants:

- "Healing for the youth. These are the people that are making us cry so much now, all the drugs they are taking." (Elder, Canada)
- "Addressing healthy minds." (Health care worker, Australia)
- Specific priorities listed in the area of diabetes included the disease and its complications (kidney problems) as well as nutrition and obesity.
- "Fast food — poor diet." (Indigenous Leader, Canada)
- "I am not sure.... Obesity and gambling are a problem in my family." (Youth, New Zealand)

Among the many *social issues that affect health*, the specific priorities that were listed included education, housing, unemployment, poverty, overpopulation, and lack of access to services.

- "Overpopulation and over housing — black mold in houses, 27 people living in 1 house." (Addictions Worker, Canada)

Within the area of *violence/abuse* specific priorities that were listed included family violence, gangs and violence, child abuse and sexual abuse.

- "I don't know.... I worry about violence." (Youth, Canada)
- "It's a big issue [lateral violence] in places I worked and affects how I perform and I feel very uncomfortable with it." (Youth Worker, Canada)

Within the area of *harm reduction* participants cited suicide prevention, healthy living and personal wellness as priorities. Finally, in the area of *historical issues affecting health* participants cited both colonization and legacy of residential schools.

- "[We] need to heal, reclaim culture and identity." (Indigenous Leader, Australia)

Conclusion

Summary

The 5th Healing Our Spirit Worldwide Gathering (HOSW), a five-day conference on Aboriginal health and healing, was held in Edmonton in 2006. This evaluation sought to provide an objective and methodologically sound appraisal of the event. Data were collected from three target groups including

session attendees, speakers and conference participants. Overall, 2,115 session, 107 speaker and 124 overall evaluations were completed. A summary of conference outcomes is presented in relation to the eight over-arching objectives of HOSW 2006.

1. **The Gathering will further the development of the Covenant for Indigenous people to use in their respective countries**.

   Evaluative Findings: As part of HOSW 2006 a document was created that will be used to promote health and healing and to ensure that they be given a more prominent place in the everyday life of Indigenous peoples around the world. This document was formulated to provide guidance and direction for Indigenous peoples in developing models of healing, self-determination and wholeness.

2. **The Gathering will help attendees to recognize the importance of traditional healers and medicine in our history, recovery and wellness**.

   Evaluative Findings: The many sessions dedicated to Indigenous culture, traditional healing and restoring balance were among the best attended at the conference. In addition, participants had the opportunity to recognize the importance of traditional healers and medicine in the history, recovery and wellness of Aboriginal people through active participation in smudging, pipe ceremonies and nightly sweat lodges. A total of 88 participants interviewed had participated in these events and most often described their experiences as "spiritual and moving."

3. **The Gathering will create a network for substance abuse healers working in Indigenous communities throughout the world.**

   Evaluative Findings: During the planning stages of the evaluation the Conference Planning Committee (CPC) asked the evaluation team to broaden its focus from substance abuse healers to all health care workers and healers working in Indigenous communities. Of the 124 participants interviewed, 60 were health care workers or healers. These individuals were asked if the conference had helped them meet others doing similar work in Indigenous communities. Overall, 32% of health care workers and 17% of healers said the conference had provided them with these opportunities. To improve networking opportunities, it is suggested that a meeting space and designated meeting times be set aside for health care workers and healers at the conference facility.

4. **The Gathering will provide a forum for Indigenous leaders to work with Governments on issues related to health, healing and self-determination.**

   Evaluative Findings: A special room was set up at a nearby hotel so that Indigenous leaders could meet and discuss issues with governments. Of the 124 participants interviewed during the evaluation, 32 were Indigenous leaders. Only 5 (16%) agreed the conference had provided them with sufficient opportunity to meet with government. To increase the likelihood that Indigenous leaders will have the opportunity to meet and work with governments, it is recommended that specific information about meeting rooms and meeting times be communicated to Indigenous leaders both in their registration packages and during each day's opening announcements.

5. **The Gathering will provide a statement from Indigenous people to world governments about Indigenous healing, health and governance**.

   Evaluative Findings: A statement about Indigenous healing, health and governance was created by delegates at HOSW 2006.

6. **The Gathering will provide a forum for Indigenous community members, youth and Elders to connect and share their challenges and strategies for success.**

   Evaluative Findings: Overall, 93% of participants stated the conference had provided a place for Indigenous people to share their challenges and strategies for success and that enough opportunities had been provided at the forum to meet and talk with other people. As well, 83% stated they had made important connections at the conference and 75% said they will contact the people they have met after the conference was over. Suggestions to further improve networking among conference participants included: more seating in hallways and corridors, longer breaks, a bigger conference venue and keeping all sessions and workshops (youth, adult and Elder) in the same building.

7. **The Gathering will strengthen the movement towards healing, healthy and self-determining Indigenous communities throughout the world.**

Evaluative Findings: Overall, 94% of participants interviewed (109 individuals) agreed or strongly that the conference had strengthened the movement toward healing Indigenous communities.

8. **The Gathering will enable the development of policy and research papers to be shared with the world Indigenous community in the areas identified as critical to health, healing and self-determination.**

Evaluative Findings: HOSW 2006 stimulated the development and presentation of policy and research papers by 314 different speakers. Among the 124 conference participants interviewed, 96% agreed or strongly agreed that the topics covered by these speakers were in areas critical to the health, healing and self-determination of Indigenous peoples.

Recommendations

1. Conference Environment

a. At future conferences, continue to create and promote a communal and positive environment that celebrates the success and progress of Indigenous peoples and communities.

2. Topics to Emphasize

a. Increase the *number* of papers presented in specific topic areas by advertising a special interest in the following areas as part of the 6th Annual HOSW Call for Papers:

- Indigenous Culture — including papers that share traditional healing, Elder's knowledge and learning about different Indigenous cultures
- Addiction and Mental Health — including papers that discuss smoking, alcohol, drug, and gambling problems, mental health issues and suicide prevention
- Child, Family and Community Health — including papers that discuss parenting, education, and helping youth
- Violence and Abuse — including papers that discuss sexual abuse, domestic and gang violence

b. Increase the *quality* of papers presented in specific topic areas, by advertising a special interest in community-based, innovative ideas and programs in the following areas as part of the 6th Annual HOSW Call for Papers:

- Disease prevention
- Suicide prevention
- Nutrition and wellness
- Restoring balance

3. Increase Networking Opportunities

a. To further improve networking opportunities between conference participants consider providing more seating in hallways and corridors, longer breaks, and a bigger venue that would allow all session and workshops (including youth and adult) to be held in the same building.

b. To increase the likelihood that individuals working in similar fields will have the opportunity to meet one another and exchange ideas, include meetings specific to Indigenous leaders, healers and health care workers in the agenda and ensure the times and places of these meetings are repeatedly communicated to these audiences. These one-hour meetings should provide a meet-and-greet atmosphere and a track chair who offers some group leadership to help people engage one another.

4. Structural Considerations

a. Given the prevalence of diabetes among Indigenous populations, consider the idea of offering small, healthy snacks at the mid-morning and mid-afternoon breaks, in addition to bottled water, coffee and tea. If snacks cannot be offered free of charge, ensure a wide variety of healthy, high quality snack and lunch selections are available for purchase on site.

b. Consider the idea of recruiting local energy healers, massage therapists and reflexologists to work on site to help out weary participants looking for a bit more energy as well as those with diabetes and other chronic illnesses who are concerned about issues related to circulation from sitting in sessions for prolonged periods. These individuals should be easy to locate in the common areas frequented by participants between sessions.

Strengths and Limitations

Strengths

There was great response from adults attending sessions. This was due to the diligence of session track chairs. When session track chairs received information about the speakers they would be introducing, the importance of getting audience members to fill out session evaluations was also commu-

nicated. This worked very well. Session track chairs took on this task assiduously, resulting in 2,115 completed session evaluations.

As well, information was gathered from three target groups and overlap questions were included and compared to strengthen findings overall. For example, those who participated in face-to-face interviews were asked if overall, topics covered in sessions were critical to Indigenous people. It was found their responses complemented the responses of participants evaluating individual sessions.

Limitations

There was limited response from youth who attended sessions. At future events, track chairs may need to be instructed to spend a greater amount of time emphasizing the importance of evaluation at the beginning of each session. As well, demographic information was not collected from session attendees and speakers. While this would add to the length of these short surveys, this information would allow evaluators to flesh out differences in opinion across demographic groupings. Third, it would be useful to collect demographic information from participants as they register for the conference so that an overall demographic profile of delegates could be created and compared to the demographic profile of participants who participate in different segments of the evaluation. Weighting could then be introduced to minimize selection bias.

Final Comments

This evaluation was a team effort and could not have been completed without the generous contributions of many individuals. The authors would like to thank all members of the Conference Organizing Committee who provided important feedback on the construction of the data collection tools used in this evaluation and the staff at Native Counseling Services for their help in organizing and executing this evaluation. In particular, Andrea Fitzgerald and Kelly Wood for their assistance in distributing session and speaker evaluations to track chairs and Kristen Raworth for assistance with data processing. The authors would also like to thank those individuals who helped out with participant interviews including Deborah Lee, Nadine Lee and Ruth-Ann Linklater as well as the many session track chairs who so diligently ensured that audience members and speakers completed evaluations during their sessions. Finally, we would like to thank the participants themselves who so generously gave of their time to participate in this evaluation.

This report will conclude with a song created by conference participants to characterize their feelings about the Gathering. The song was created by audience members as part of a session supported by the session speaker, Mere Taylor-Tuiloma, a Maori woman from New Zealand, and her two "warriors" (*The Spirit Daily HOSW Gathering Newsletter*, 2006). The following song is their tribute to the Healing Our Spirit Worldwide — Fifth Gathering.

We are One
There is joy, light and peace
Touching our families
Creating Unity

Our Creator is healing our spirit
That makes us happy and hopeful
In our journey we find balance
And harmony.

Freedom and belonging
Thankful for the reconnection
With our true identity
Which is never ending.

References

2006 *The Spirit Daily HOSW Gathering Newsletter* (August 11). Available at: http://www.hosw.com/docs/hosw%20newletter%20friday.pdf

Appendix A: Data Collection Tools

Healing Our Spirit Worldwide

Session Evaluation Form

Session Date: _____ Session Time: _____

Session Name: _____

1.	For each statement, please check whether you **Strongly Agree** (SA), **Agree** (A), are **Undecided** (U), **Disagree** (D) or **Strongly Disagree** (SD).	SA	A	U	D	SD
a)	This session was valuable to me in the work I do.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b)	This session was valuable to me personally.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c)	The topic of this session was an area that is critical to Indigenous people.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d)	The seating arrangements were suitable.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e)	The session was an appropriate length.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
f)	The speakers could be heard clearly.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. How would you rate this session overall? _____ Excellent
_____ Good
_____ Satisfactory
_____ Poor

3. Please share any comments or suggestions you have about this session.

_____

_____

_____

_____

Healing Our Spirit Worldwide
Speakers Evaluation Form

1.	For each statement, please check whether you **Strongly Agree** (SA), **Agree** (A), are **Undecided** (U), **Disagree** (D) or **Strongly Disagree** (SD).	SA	A	U	D	SD
a)	The conference is well-organized.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b)	The conference organizers provided me with the tools I needed to feel organized and prepared to give my presentation.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c)	The process of registering to speak at this conference was straightforward.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d)	The room and seating arrangements were suitable.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e)	The session was an appropriate length.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. Please share any comments or suggestions about how we might have improved your experience as a speaker at this conference.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Healing Our Spirit Worldwide
Informed Verbal Consent

Checklist of information for interviewers to share with participants:

- To evaluate this conference and make sure it is even better the next time, we would like to gain your thoughts and experiences on how it is going so far. Have you already been interviewed? (if yes, thank them but do not do an interview)
- The interview will take about 15 minutes.
- You do not have to provide your name and all of your answers will remain confidential.
- If there are any questions you do not want to answer just say "skip" and we will move on to the next question.
- Your opinions are extremely valuable to us! To thank you for sharing your insights with us, we will provide you with a small gift at the end of the interview.
- We can end the interview at any time if you get tired or do not want to finish.
- A gift will still be provided if you decide you do not want to answer all the questions.

Would you like to participate in the survey? Yes ☐ No ☐

Healing Our Spirit Worldwide
Overall Conference Evaluation Form

1.	For each statement, indicate whether you **Strongly Agree** (SA), **Agree** (A), are **Undecided** (U), **Disagree** (D) or **Strongly Disagree** (SD).	SA	A	U	D	SD
a)	The information I am learning at this conference is valuable in the work I do.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b)	The information I am learning at this conference is valuable to me personally.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c)	I have made important connections at this conference.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d)	I will contact the people I have met at the conference after it is over.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e)	This conference has strengthened the movement toward healing Indigenous communities.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
f)	This conference has provided a place for Indigenous people to share their challenges and strategies for success.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
g)	The session topics cover areas that are critical to the health, healing and self-determination of Indigenous people.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
h)	My expectations for this conference were met.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

2. Why did you attend this conference? (check all that apply)

Personal growth _____

Meet others / build networks _____

Build employment-related skills _____

Learn about Indigenous culture _____

Other _____

Please explain:_____

3.	*How would you rate the:*	*Excellent*	*Good*	*Satisfactory*	*Poor*	*Don't know/NA*
a)	Conference overall?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
b)	Meals?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
c)	Ceremonies?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
d)	Marketplace?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
e)	Evening activities?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
i)	Sessions and workshops?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
j)	Youth programs?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
k)	Elders' gatherings?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
l)	Children's programs?	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

4. What were the 2 topics you were most interested in learning about at this conference?

Topic A. _____

Topic B. _____

5. Do you feel you feel you have increased your knowledge in these areas as a result of attending this conference?

Topic A: Not at all ☐ Somewhat ☐ Quite a bit ☐

Topic B: Not at all ☐ Somewhat ☐ Quite a bit ☐

Please explain:_____

_____

6. How did you learn about this conference?

_____

_____

_____

7. What have you enjoyed most about this conference?

_____

_____

_____

8. Where have you spent most of your time at the conference? (check only one)

Sessions and Workshops _____
Marketplace _____
Youth Program _____
Elder's Gathering _____
Ceremonies _____
Activities outside Conference _____
Other _____

9. Have you attended a ceremony at the conference? If yes, which one(s)?

_____

10. Do you have anything you would like to share about your experiences at ceremony?

_____

_____

11. Has the conference provided you with enough opportunities to meet and talk with other people? Yes ☐ No ☐

12. What could we do differently at future conferences to help people connect and share with one another?

_____

_____

_____

13. Are there topics or activities missing from this conference that you would like to see at future conferences?

_____

_____

_____

14. What should not be changed at future conferences?

_____

_____

_____

15. Did an organization sponsor you to come to this conference?

Yes ☐ No ☐

If yes, would you be willing to tell us who? _____

If no, would you be willing to share whether you received any sort of funding to attend this conference?

_____

16. How did you find the registration process?

_____

_____

_____

17. What would you like to see to keep you updated on the next Healing Our Spirit Worldwide Conference? (check all that apply)

Newsletters by email _____

Newsletters by mail _____

Website updates _____

Other _____

Please Explain: _____

18. What do you know about the International Indigenous Council Movement?

_____

_____

_____

19. Other Information

In this, the last section, we are seeking some general evaluations and a little information about you to help us organize the survey responses.

AGE: under 20 ☐ 20-29 ☐ 30-39 ☐ 40-49 ☐ 50-59 ☐ over 59 ☐

GENDER: female ☐ male ☐

My country of origin is: _____

I am an INDIGENOUS PERSON: Yes ☐ No ☐

Group: _____

I have attended the Healing Our Spirit Worldwide Conference for approximately:

First Time ☐ Two to Five Years ☐ For more than Five Years ☐

Do you plan to attend this Conference in the future? Yes ☐ No ☐

20. Are you an Indigenous leader? yes ☐ no ☐ (if no skip to next question)

If yes, has the conference provided a place for you to work with Governments on health, healing or self-determination issues? Yes ☐ No ☐

Please explain:

_____

_____

_____

21. Are you a healer? yes ☐ no ☐ (if no skip to next question)

Type:_____

If yes, has the conference helped you to meet other healers working in Indigenous communities? yes ☐ no ☐

Please explain:

_____

_____

_____

22. Are you a health care worker? yes ☐ no ☐ (if no skip to next question)

Type:_____

If yes, has the conference helped you to meet other health care workers working in Indigenous communities? yes ☐ no ☐

Please explain:

_____

_____

_____

23. What are the health priorities in your community?

_____

_____

_____

24. Please share any comments or suggestions you have about the conference.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____