



Open Letter: Racism against Indigenous peoples in British Columbia health care needs to stop

January 15, 2021

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed some difficult truths about our society and health care systems regarding the treatment of Indigenous peoples. The recent review of BC's Health care system by Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond revealed the multiple forms of prejudice and racism against Indigenous peoples at the point of care in all regions of BC. The volume of racist incidents identified in the report was so pervasive it was decided to leave a reporting line open for those who are experiencing racism in health care as the system is undergoing change. As the Report's title, *In Plain Sight*, reflects that this racism has been in the healthcare system for some time, is obvious and out in the open, and causes harm, suffering and poor service. The Report strongly recommends a call for transformative change to address this racism, grounded in the full implementation of the basic human rights of Indigenous peoples as reflected in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The BC Government has committed to implement all of the Report's recommendations. This work is urgent and must progress despite the pandemic.

The racism revealed in the review is also seen in responses to the pandemic. In B.C. communities, racism against Indigenous peoples is showing its ugly face as the system responds to the health crisis in Indigenous communities as a result of the pandemic response. In some communities, racist commentary and abuse has been directed at Indigenous peoples, and Indigenous people are being wrongly targeted as solely responsible for transmission of the disease. This prompted local government and Provincial government leaders to speak out and to stand up for the importance of respectful care, treatment and response to the pandemic for Indigenous peoples in BC.

In Snuneymuxw First Nation and at Cowichan Tribes on Vancouver Island, the COVID-19 outbreak responses and vaccine roll-out has been met with some anti-Indigenous racist commentary. Similar commentary was seen in a number of other communities around British Columbia. Indigenous peoples require urgent access to the vaccine because of the vulnerability of Indigenous peoples due to the poorer health outcomes and chronic health conditions caused by generations of poor access to health care and services. The response to date has been to partner with communities through Health authorities and with the First Nations Health Authority in a co-operative pandemic response. At the front lines, we are witnessing important rebuilding of the relationships needed to roll out health care change.

When racist behaviour and commentary arises, we must all be anti-racist. We urge everyone to resist prejudices and to not give air time to ignorant and hateful views that target Indigenous peoples. It is necessary to always advance our understandings about the conditions that Indigenous peoples have faced, and continue to face, which have caused such intense vulnerability to this pandemic and poor health outcomes more broadly.

While we practice our common values espoused by Dr. Bonnie Henry of staying calm, kind and safe, we have to be clear about one thing: anti-Indigenous racism has no place in BC's pandemic response or community commentary. We must shut down any hateful targeted behaviour or language that is grounded in ignorance or denial of the vulnerabilities of Indigenous communities. To end racism, we have to name it and speak up and shut it down. We cannot leave the

response to the Indigenous leaders alone, like Chief Mike Wyse and Chief Chip Seymour. Indigenous peoples are capable and are managing the COVID-19 pandemic with support from health authorities and the Governments of BC and Canada. Indigenous peoples need protection from COVID-19 and the vaccine roll-out will place a priority on ensuring they get access to this as soon as possible, such as through the strong cooperative work on Vancouver Island.

All of us as British Columbians need to take active measures to identify and remove racism in our health care system, and indeed all public services as well as our local communities and virtual gathering places. The burden of addressing racism needs to come off the shoulders of Indigenous peoples.

Together we need to continue to stand up for respectful treatment of Indigenous peoples and Nations. We ask you to shut down anti-Indigenous racism wherever it appears and to remind people to be calm, kind and safe includes ending racist commentary and targeting of any population, including Indigenous peoples.

Sincerely,



Chief Mike Wyse
Snuneymuxw First Nation



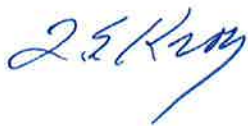
Paul Manly, MP
Nanaimo-Ladysmith



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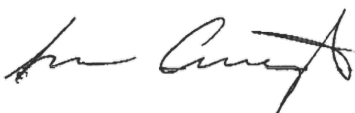
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