

Western Medicine as an imperial system – First Nations Health

Introduction:

- **Defining colonialism**
- **Health & the imperial project**

1. Imperialism & Disease

- **Pre-contact health**
- **Contact & Infectious Disease**

2. Imperial Health ‘Care’

- **Pluralism to assimilation**
- **Aboriginal health jurisdiction**
- **Federal Department of Indian Affairs**

3. Imperial Health

Personnel & Institutions

- **Indian Doctors, Nursing Stations & Field Matrons**
- **Institutions**
- **Cultural loss & imperial health systems**

Conclusion

- **Assessing the impact of colonialism**

Defining Colonialism

- **System of economic, political, social & cultural domination of one group of people over another**
- **Multi-faceted: land-ownership; governance; cultural & social beliefs**

Health & the Imperial Project

- **Contact: 16th century**
- **Empires: late 19th century**
- **Role of Medicine in European global domination**
- **Othering the Aboriginal body**

Pre-Contact Health



- Canadian Aboriginal Groups: Arctic, Western Subarctic, Eastern Subarctic, Northeastern Woodlands, Plains, Plateau, Northwest Coast
- limited infectious diseases
- good diet

Pre-Contact Health

- **practical, ritual & spiritual therapeutics**
- **healers = shamans, herbalists, medicine men**
- **health = balance of physical, mental, & spiritual**

“Sammy said he dreamt about this disease. He was dreaming that some soldiers came over to Nemiah and shot this disease with all kinds of colours through the sky. That is why Sammy William decided to stay at Tsuniah a little longer.”

Tsil”co”tin Narrative, “The Big Flu”

Contact & Infectious Disease

- **Bacteriological invasion**
- **Death stats: 1/3 Fijian population; Maori population shrunk from between 100,000-500,000 to 45,000**
- **Routes of disease transmission**

Contact & Infectious Disease

- Dietary evolution
- Western diseases
- Loss of traditional knowledge & healing systems

For Native communities, the losses inflicted during these years were irreplaceable. As cultural knowledge became increasingly concentrated in certain individuals within families, clans, and lineages, the loss of a person meant the disappearance of particular skills, stories, wisdom.

Mary Ellen Kelm, *Colonizing Bodies*.

Contact & Infectious Disease

- Long-term impact of tuberculosis in Aboriginal populations
- Highest deaths under age 30

Contact & Infectious Disease

1940s Health Stats - Aboriginal versus all Canadians:

- 7 times likely to die of pneumonia
- 13 times likely to die of whooping cough
- 9 times likely to die of influenza
- 46 times likely to die of measles

Pluralism to Assimilation

- Noble Savage
- Medical Pluralism
- Indigenous
bodies = diseased
bodies

Pluralism to Assimilation

- **'saving' Aboriginals - social control & assimilation**
- **aboriginal medicine = unscientific, irrational & dangerous**

Aboriginal Health Jurisdiction

- **British North America Act of 1867 - 'medicine chest'**
- **Federal Department of Indian Affairs est 1880 – Indian & Northern Health Service**
- **separate health system until 1945**

“I do not believe that an Indian can be treated for any sickness unless he is hospitalized - he cannot be trusted to take medicine intelligently.” Indian Doctor, 1940s

'Indian' Institutions

- **Christian 'Indian' hospitals built 19th, early 20th centuries**
- **Dept of Indian Affairs funding**
- **Aboriginal & White hospital use**

**“Removed from the influence of the
‘backward’ home environment... boarders
would be educationally and morally
prepared to elevate their families and
communities toward a Canadian ideal.”**

Historian Ken Coates

'Indian' Institutions

- **residential school period: 19th century to 1960s**
- **living conditions**
- **death rates**
- **cultural loss**
- **intergenerational impact**

Mary John

1913-2004

Stoney Creek

Woman

'Indian' Institutions

- **Inuit hospital ships from 1930s**
- **1940s-1960s: transportation south to institutions**
- **peak period: 1/6th Inuit people being treated, average hospital stay of 28 months**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QZ-x7D47Oao>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBpM9Y5ibuA>

The Necessities of Life

Raven & First Man

Bill Reid

Brian Jungen