

Indigenous Perspectives on Death and Dying



Ian Anderson Continuing Education Program
in End-of-Life Care



Life and Death

We understand who we are -

We know where we came from -

*We accept and understand our destiny
here on Mother Earth -*

We are spirit having a human experience.



The Story of Indigenous People

- Story of the last three centuries is one of survival and adaptation
- Traditional cultures have **survived AND evolved**
- **Survival** is an appropriate term since powerful combination of church, state and economics
→ dispossession of lands and beliefs
- **Diversity:** no single “Native” culture
- Be careful not to generalize



Ontario and Manitoba

Two strong, surviving and distinct traditions

- **The Haudenosaunee** – People of the Long House – also known as the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy
- **The Anishinabek** – Ojibway, Odawa, Potawatomi, Saulteaux, Cree and Oji-Cree



Traditional Beliefs in Present Times

- Traditional beliefs have survived
 - Organized ways of religion
 - Way of life
- Christianity is the dominant religion in many communities
 - Missionary
 - Intermarriage
 - Voluntary conversions
 - May have several faiths or creeds represented
- Aspects of traditional beliefs may be maintained while respecting Christian ways



Fallacy of Assumptions

- Remember that “tradition” is not easily measured
- Don’t assume a person is traditional because he/she is aboriginal
- Don’t assume a Christian aboriginal person will have the same attitudes towards death and dying that a European parishioner would



Objectives

- Discuss traditional beliefs about the paths and meaning of death and dying
- Discuss how modern medicine can seek to understand, respect and accommodate these traditional beliefs
- Be able to communicate with indigenous patients and families at the end of life



Creation Stories

- Creation stories of respective nations outline
 - Where aboriginal people originated
 - How they came to their place on Mother Earth

- Speak of “original instructions”, laws and codes of conduct which govern responsibilities to others and to all aspects of the natural world



Anishnabe (Ojibway)

Perspective on Life and Death

The Circle of Life

- In order to understand death, first must embrace the circle of life
- Four stages in the journey of the human spirit:
 - Birth
 - Life
 - Death
 - Afterlife



We Came From the Stars: Origins

- Creation stories → legacy of relationships with ancestors from the beginning of time to the present

- Each of us is born with
 - A spirit
 - Sacred name
 - Clan or nation
 - Gifts or talents
 - Destiny in which we will face many challenges



End of Life Ceremonies

- Reflect a traditional person's name, clan, nation and accomplishments
- Our origins help us understand our purpose on earth and our eventual destination when our spirits leave Mother Earth



Life

- **We are spirit having a human experience**
- We are composed of three great parts
 - **Spirit**
 - **Mind**
 - **Body**
- As we are born our spirit leaves the Creator and spirit world with its information on gifts, talents and destiny



Life

- Spirit enters the baby's body and life begins
- Four stages of life
 - **Childhood**
 - **Youth**
 - **Adulthood**
 - **Elder years**
- Each person's challenge is to find the Creator, celebrate the Creator and be of service with one's gifts to one's people to all of humankind and to all life in Creation



In our efforts, we...

- Are challenged
- Experience failures
- Confront our weaknesses
- Embrace healing and spiritual training through lodges, societies and ceremonies of the nation

- Nature of spiritual training imprints the identify of the person through adulthood and elder years
- Ceremonies, individual and community based, are important part of life



Dying

- When dying, a traditional person will call for the ceremonies, medicine and prayers that will guide his/her spirit back to the spirit world
- Spiritual leader or medicine person close to the dying person will conduct the ceremonies
- Family and clan members will be present
- “Medicine” in this context means spiritual power – a combination of ability and authority – linked to an ability to advise and heal



Special Circumstances

- For people who die unexpectedly and suddenly or those who are unconscious, family will assume responsibilities for the ceremonies
- Ceremonies for Chiefs are more complicated and resemble a state funeral reflecting their service to the people



Death

- At the time of death, our original mother, Mother Earth, who nourishes our bodies, reclaims our physical form
- Our original father, the Creator, takes our spirits to return them to their place of origin



Afterlife

- Spirit can be seen and felt leaving the body
- It travels westward across the prairie grass, over a river and into the mountains
- It ascends the mountains to the high clouds where a bright light guides it to the place where loved ones wait to embrace it
- The spirit lives forever
- It takes its place in the spirit world according to deeds completed on earth
- The Cycle of Life is complete when spirit returns to its place of origin



Creator

- Neither male nor female but
- Powerful, all loving, all knowing Spirit
- Holds all power, all medicine, all wisdom
- Aided in his work by
 - Our Ancestors and Warriors, both men and women, who walked before us
 - Spirit beings called Grandmothers and Grandfathers



Spirit World

- Four levels where the helpers of Creator work each day and night to teach, heal, guide and help us plan our ceremonial life
- **First level:** closest to Mother Earth, contains spirit helpers who bring us dreams to teach/warn us of future events
- **Second level:** spirit helpers who teach us and appear in ceremonies, seen in visions



Spirit World(con't)

- **Third Level:** spirit helpers who act as consultants in planning healing ceremonies, warn of possible sources of trouble
- **Fourth Level:** spirit helpers are healers who enter the lodge and body and bring messages on how to go about healing, give an understanding of the medicines needed



Anishnabe Ceremonies: Preparing to Die

- Nature and practice of ceremony varies from community to community
- The one described in this presentation is a prototype
- Many ceremonies are specific to the spiritual leader/healer who carries them
- He/she has earned the gift and right to perform particular ceremonies



Pipe Ceremony

- A medicine bundle containing a pipe and other sacred items is brought to the bedside of the dying person
- Sacred tobacco and offerings of food and cloth are essential to the ceremony
- Patient repents or makes right his relationship with Creator
- All pray to Creator for safe passage of the spirit to the sky world
- Ancestors are invited to help guide the spirit in its travels



Pipe Ceremony (con't)

- Sacred medicines are burned – **sage, sweet grass, cedar, sweet flag, diamond willow fungus** – to purify the dying person and all those present
- Family members will burn the food and cloth offerings outside the hospital in a fire pit or in a sacred fire at home
- Family, clan, friends will hold vigil to bring comfort, pray and ease pain until the spirit leaves the body
- Sacred songs are sung and family members have opportunity to speak to the dying person



The Pipe

- **Bowl** represents the woman, **Stem** represents the man → when they are brought together, life unfolds
- Sacred tobacco is smoked in the pipe
- Each time the pipe is raised it is a celebration of life and all creation under the Creator
- Creator's guidance is asked for
- Messages received through the pipe ceremony can be shared
- For the Anishinabek, the most sacred tool of communication with the Creator is the pipe



Preparing the Patient to Die

Primary:

- Dying patient needs privacy with the spiritual leader either alone or with family present
- Teaching ceremonies: patient hears about love of Creator, nature of the spirit world, and transition of the spirit from physical to sky world
- Encouragement, strength and support given to the dying
- Stories of life, dreams, visions, fears, regrets and guilt are listened to by spiritual healer



Primary (con't)

- Dying person's mind cleared of negative force through prayer, smudging, pipe ceremonies and sacred songs
- With a good mind, the patient can receive the teaching and prepare for spirit's journey



Secondary

- Outside the hospital, families perform supportive ceremonies at the sacred fire, prayers in purification lodge, ancestor fires with ancestor pipe and bundle
- Sacred fire is a very special ceremonial tool, and is central to the practice of ceremony



Sacred Fire

- Very important
- Source of communication with Creator all spirits, warriors, ancestors bring the will of Creator to heal, teach, correct and protect human beings to the earth world
- Carry the prayers of family to Creator
- Visions, answers and guidance flow from fire to the people
- Offerings of tobacco, food or cloth to request safe journey to spirit world



The Purification Lodge

- Beautiful, powerful experience
- Gift from the Creator
- Allow people to purify, detoxify and heal in the presence of the Creator's power and love
- Healing can be emotional, physical, mental and spiritual
- Family prayer lodges, separate lodges for men and women, lodges where men, women and children will gather for particular purpose



When a Person is Dying

- Lodge will be a family prayer sweat
- Family members will pray, let go of negative feelings, gather strength and make prayers/offerings for the dying person
- If the person has passed into the spirit world, sweat lodge is called a journey or traveling sweat



Ancestor Pipe Bundle

- Sacred bundle used to communicate with Creator, Mother Earth and spirits of the ancestors
- Bowl is black = this world
- Stem is white = spirit world
- When used, must be food, tobacco and cloth offerings
- Usually an ancestor fire, similar to sacred fire but with some technical changes, accompanies use of the pipe



Spiritual Leader

- May do a pipe ceremony with dying person or an ancestral pipe ceremony to ask ancestors to assist the spirit on its impending journey
- Choice will depend on the spiritual leader's gifts, teachings and training
- He/she will inform the family of the procedures and ask them to make necessary preparations
- Ancestral pipe and fire are very important ceremonies, require a high level of spiritual knowledge and capability to not upset the balance of the spiritual world



Tertiary

- Funeral rites are determined by the family, clan and nation according to the duties deceased occupied in life
- Ceremonies give specific instructions as to claiming, cleaning, dressing the body, rituals
- Spiritual leader will be present at claiming of the body to talk to the spirit and the body
- May not choose the services of a funeral home
- Funeral rites will be conducted by elders and spiritual leaders associated with the tradition



After the Funeral

- Common for close family members to hold a 24 hour ancestor fire on the loved one's birthday
- In honour of his/her memory
- Helps family members, especially children, to understand they are the most recent in a long line of ancestors leading back to the beginning of time when the Creator placed the first man and woman on earth
- Death Feast always accompanies this ancestor fire



Preparing the Family for the Death of a Loved one

Primary

- **Spiritual leader** brings a medicine bundle to a family meeting
- He/she will listen to fears, worries, dreams, visions of family members
- Provide an understanding of death, afterlife, spirit world and Creator
- Encourage, support and provide a positive “good” mind to the suffering of the family



Primary (con't)

- Hospital based ceremonials help the grieving family move from anger, fear, guilt, remorse or internal division to expressions of love, acceptance of fate and peace
- Pipe ceremonies, medicine songs, smudging and offerings help strengthen the family and increase mutual support



Secondary

- Ceremonial activities outside the hospital include:
 - ancestor fire
 - purification lodge
 - sweat lodge
 - sacred fires
 - Ghost Dance



Healing Ceremonies

- Include pipe ceremony, sacred medicines, sacred songs
- Work together to heal spirits and hearts of family members
- Sacred messages of comfort and courage come from the pipe
- Creator spirit messengers enter the lodge and bring messages, dreams and visions
- Lift grief from the heart, confusion from the mind and heal physical effects of grief
- Can be held in lodge, home, or hospital



Importance of Healing Ceremonies

- Very important to family, friends, clan members
- Let go of the spirit of the deceased
- If grieving cycle is not complete, grieving person may walk through life emotionally wounded or mentally challenged



Ghost Dance

- Annual ceremony, usually held in the fall when the leaves have fallen from the trees
- Conducted at full moon for 4 nights from sunset to sunrise – 4 nights of dancing and fasting
- Community celebration of ancestors
- Special offerings: cloth, tobacco and traditional foods are given to the ancestors
 - **to thank them for their prayers for the people in this world**
 - **to show them they are remembered and that people still do their best to honour them and live a sacred way of life like they did**



Ghost Dance (con't)

- Communal gathering
- Teachings by Elders and spiritual leaders each evening on importance of recalling ancestral lineage and understanding that we are the sum total of all of our ancestors represented
- Powerful tool to assist those who are still grieving: many spirits visit the lodge to provide answers to hearts still filled with pain or loneliness



Tertiary

- Funeral rites are directed by the family, clan and nation
- Variety of forms: usually last four days
- Wake in the home where sacred songs are sung, a feast is offered and family members keep a vigil over the body all day and all night
- Funeral ceremonies are conducted in the sacred lodge and are conducted by the Elders, spiritual leaders and speakers



Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Perspectives on Life and Death

The Sky World

- Birth, life, death and afterlife are integral aspects of Haudenosaunee cosmology
- In order to understand death and accept the journey to the Sky World, it is crucial to understand the origin of life, its laws, codes of conduct, challenges and consequences



Haudenosaunee Creation Story

- Provides deeper insights into the beginning of life, the first human beings and all aspects of creation
- Defines relationship between all life on Mother Earth to the spirits in heavens and the beings in the Sky World
- Great universal contest between the upper world of benevolence and lower world of disarray
- Humans have to negotiate between these spheres in life and death



Death

- When a person dies, there are spirit forces at work that try to disrupt the long spiritual journey of the soul to the Sky World
- The dead have power and it is dangerous to neglect the spiritual needs of the dead
- Souls of the dead have a path of destiny they must follow: journey after life

from **Richard Hill, Beaver Clan Tuscarora & Peter Jemison, Heron Clan Seneca, paper on “mortuary practices”**



Ohgiwe/All Night Dance/ Dance of the Dead

- Annual ceremony to please and feed the lingering spirits of the dead
- The spirits of all dead Native Americans from entire Turtle Island are believed to join in
- No tribal, language or cultural differences with the dead

**from Richard Hill, Beaver Clan Tuscarora & Peter Jemison,
Heron Clan Seneca, paper on “mortuary practices”**



When A Person Dies...

- Their breath is taken by the Faceless One, the destroyer who brings death
- Spirit takes a number of days to get used to the death of the body and to prepare its journey
- Ceremonies and practices assist the spirit on the path, said to be the Milky Way

**from Richard Hill, Beaver Clan Tuscarora & Peter Jemison,
Heron Clan Seneca, paper on “mortuary practices”**



When A Person Dies...

- **Grandmother Moon** obtains some of their hair
- One hair detaches itself and comes directly to her
- This is the sign that someone has died in the lower world and has begun journey to Sky World
- Hair is weaved into a mantle – number of hairs in the mantle bear witness to the number of people who visited earth while it lasted
- Birth and death are connected since Grandmother Moon has domain over fertility of women and when children are born



The Soul or Inner Life Force

- Soul has its own destiny after life
- Soul is different from the life spirit that makes the body alive
- Inner life force given to the body by Creator
- It is his breath that first brought life and as long as we breathe, the life force lives
- When we die, life force/soul leaves the body but may linger for 10 days requiring a feast to send it back to the Sky World



Life Force/Soul

- Similar to light or vapour or a body without substance
- Retain personal identity and may inhabit other forms of life
- May leave the body while a person is still alive and go to any place to acquire knowledge
- This knowledge is revealed to the person in the form of dreams



House of Souls in Sky World

- Where all souls of humans come from and return to
- Each soul has its own path leading from the Soul House to the body, to the Great Sky Road (Milky Way) – the good sky path
- Another sky path exists for evil souls and leads to a place half-way between earth and Sky World
- The souls of the dead have power to affect the living – respect must be shown to the dead and their souls cared for



Ga-do-waas

- Ga-do-waas lives in the upper sky and has four eyes to watch the four corners of the turtle island
- He once lived on earth, but began to destroy all the game so was transplanted to the gate through which all souls must pass if they want to complete their journey to Soul House
- He has a powerful hunting belt that had power to attract game on which he placed stars and cast into the sky
- This Star belt lights the Sky Paths and casts light on the longhouse to guide the soul departing away from the body



The Path of the Soul

- South wind accompanies soul to Ga-do-wass' gate
- As it passes the portal, Ga-do-waas reaches into the sky and adds another star to his belt to guide the soul's journey
- When soul crosses the entire sky, he removes the star from his belt and returns it to its place in the sky.
- Souls at peace travel by way of Milky Way
- Souls who died restless are forced to repeat painful tasks that are symbolic of misdeeds in life



Preparing to Die

- Death is a natural transition from the physical earthly world to the Sky World
- Patient has to make his/her wishes known so appropriate ceremonies can be prepared
- Ceremonies are for both the grieving person and the one who is preparing to die
- They provide comfort, ease pain and bring families together
- Advisable that these ceremonies be an integral part of life



Speaker of Sacred Words

- “Chief” in this context is one of the traditional chiefs of the Iroquois Confederacy
- Also known as *rotiianeson* or “men who are of the good”
- Bear the burden of being mentors to all people as well as maintainers of the ceremonies



Ceremonies

- Special speeches are said by the Chief at the bedside to release the spirit from duties on Earth and give sanction for it to move to the Sky World
- Chief who gives the speech will be from the opposite moiety of the dying person



Moieties

- In traditional society, each person has a clan derived from their mother except in special circumstances
- In ceremonies, the longhouse is divided into two parts = separate moieties
- Tradition tends to reflect duality of the world, e.g. male/female, light/dark
- When a person dies, world is also divided in two: people whose minds are grieving or clouded and clear-minded ones, i.e. friends



Role of Moieties

- Clear-minded respect and make room for grief and then raise up the minds of those who are grieving
- Clear-minded person from opposite moiety is responsible for reminding family that life goes on, that one can let the spirit of the deceased go on its journey



Ceremonies

- Speeches indicate all dying person's cares and wishes will be looked after
- Home ceremony involves the burning of tobacco, speeches, a repenting ritual, the releasing of spirit and comforting the family
- Ten-day feast which follows funeral rites ensures the last wishes are fulfilled
- Laws and ceremonies that uphold the peace of Confederacy place a 10-day limit on formal grieving → then a feast is held to help spirit on its journey



In Unexpected Cases of Life-Threatening Illness

- Ceremonies can occur in private room in the hospital
- Ceremony can take place at home, using the person's shirts or blouses → then a visit can be made by the Chief or another family member to comfort the grieving ones. Food from the ceremony will be brought
- Home ceremony may be followed by one in hospital



Purpose of the Ceremony

- Acknowledge that spirit lives forever and will return to Creator
- Body will return to Mother Earth, our original mother and life sustainer
- The Speaker will address the spirit of the dying person before it leaves the body to tell the body and the spirit that they are going home
- Dying person is released from earthly duties
- The spirit is addressed at the hospital bed after death and again as the undertaker takes the body



After the Death

- It is important that the body be brought to the place he/she lived since the spirit will still be with the family and people at home
- Body is cleaned, washed and dressed in traditional clothing
- The wake takes place at the home
- A Speaker conducts the wake and addresses the family and guides them in beginning new relationships with one another
- Funeral occurs at the longhouse



Place of Death

- Spirits, especially if angry or unhappy, often linger in place where they were disconnected from the body
- Place of death can be seen as place of bad luck, misfortune and illness
- Can result in hospital and room for last ceremonies being associated with negative power
- Already hospitals are thought of as places people go to die
- Ask how room can be purified after death and protected between uses



Funeral Rites

At a traditional funeral:

- Speaker will tell the assembly that the deceased is still among us but is about to begin a journey – the “spirit world path of the deceased”
- In older graves will find tools and utensils used in life since anticipated would be needed on the journey
- Death Feast is offered for the departed relatives since if fail to feed the spirits of the dead, illness can result

**from Richard Hill, Beaver Clan Tuscarora & Peter Jemison,
Heron Clan Seneca, paper on “mortuary practices”**

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Role of the Clan

- Immediate family and clan go into mourning
- Clans from the opposite moiety conduct the wake and funeral
- 10 days after the funeral → feast to distribute the personal property of the deceased and send them on journey
- Tobacco is often burned to say goodbye
- In March, most longhouses have a dance dedicated to all the dead to assure they are properly cared for in death

from **Richard Hill, Beaver Clan Tuscarora & Peter Jemison, Heron Clan Seneca, paper on “mortuary practices**



Wake

- Held in family home
- Speaker will address the family, guests and deceased
- Midnight “lunch”, moccasin, bowl/glove games helps appointed friends from the opposite moiety stay awake
- They remain with body until burial
- Believed that spirits of the dead are still around and could return to take someone with them, need to take special precautions →



Accommodation in the Hospital

- Rule that allows only immediate family to visit will offend clan and extended family
- Expect many visitors
- If possible, a dying indigenous person should have a private room, close to an entrance so many visitors will not disturb others



Room Allocation and Smoke

- **Designate a room in the hospital for ceremonial purposes – if windows increase sense of dignity and freedom**
- **Should be able to accommodate 10-25 people and hospital bed**
- **Should have air filtration to deal with the smoke from medicines which must be burned as cleaning incense or as offerings and to accompany speeches**
- **No smoke detector or ability to turn it off**
- **Contain around 10 chairs or sofa, table, lamp, hot plate and cast-iron frying pan**



Room Location & Offerings

- Section of hospital where won't disturb others
- Consider soundproofing
- Consider a location for sacred fire outside the hospital in nearby park, where can burn offerings and pray
- Remember urban hospital can be very alien environment for family that has lived close to nature – natural setting will seem like an oasis



Administration

- Important not to interrupt the ceremonies
- If interrupted will be seen as flawed or ineffective
- Not possible to do ceremony over
- Understanding and respect is important
- **Basic rule is that the ceremony will take as long as it takes**
- Person conducting the ceremony may be able to give estimate of timing



Communication

- **Indigenous people facing the death of a loved one can often be numb and unresponsive just like non-indigenous people**
- **In some communities, people consider direct eye, especially with strangers, rude and aggressive**
- **Even if not looking you in the eye, still listening and hearing**
- **Remember that in cultures that avoid confrontation, the most important information is communicated indirectly**
- **May refer obliquely to ideas or problems to avoid offense**



Staff and Students

- Students are often not welcomed in such times of stress: personal space and modesty prevent indigenous persons from being open to “viewing” by those other than attending MD/RN



Communication (con't)

- Responses to questions will not be immediate, even if clear “yes/no” questions
- Aboriginal cultures teach people to take time with answers as a matter of respect
- If the question was easy, you would not be asking
- Respect demands that give question careful thought
- Wait for an answer
- There will often be pauses between parts of an answer, longer pauses than what you are used to



Language

- Avoid overly technical terms
- Don't "talk down"
- Avoid raising your voice
- Plain English, a simple explanation of the situation, and a plain question is often enough
- Hard decisions will be reached through discussion by the group rather than by one person
- Give the family time to discuss things among themselves
- Family may choose a spokesperson, but it is important for the healthcare staff to speak to them as a group



Communication – Last Thoughts

- **Indigenous people value compassion, kindness and gentleness**
- If you show these when you meet them, you will be respected
- Maintaining a professional distance, will not engender the same respect:
 - **Take the time to be human**
 - **Visit with people, make conversation before getting down to business**



Attending Ceremonies

- Hospital staff often be welcome at ceremonies, if request made respectfully, quietly and carefully
- Approach should be made slightly indirectly: “I have come to like _____ very much. It would help my own spirit if I could attend some of the ceremonies to ease his passing and his family. I wonder if the family would mind. Could you ask for me?”
- Once in the ceremony, you are part of the circle
- Watch and do as people of your gender do
- Generally people will tell you what to do
- Expected to stay for its entirety



When A Person Dies in the Hospital

- In some communities when a person dies in hospital room, friends and families leave and pray in hall or elsewhere so don't crowd the spirit and give it time to leave on its journey
- Do not rush in and remove the body
- Hospital issues like pronouncing death and dealing with the body are a matter of judgment and can be discussed with the spiritual leader or elder



Autopsies and Handling Bodies

- **As a rule, aboriginal people prefer that the bodies of their dead relatives be taken home as soon as possible and be interfered with as little as possible**
- **Rule is not absolutely universal**
- **Some will strongly resist autopsy; in cases where obliged by law, spiritual advisors can discuss ways to accommodate both the law and family beliefs**
- **Often the family will request that body parts removed during OR be returned so they can be placed back in the land in special ceremony**



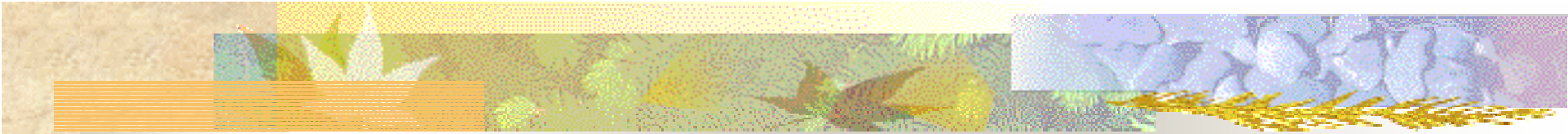
Medicine Pouch & Wampum Beads

- Medicine pouch may be placed around the dead person's neck
- Wampum beads may be in his/her hands:
 - sacred
 - recall 1st ceremony of condolence
 - and origins of Great Peace
- Evidence of pledges, repentance or status
- Leave them alone and ask the family or representative as indirectly as possible what they want done with them
- Most often, stay with the body



Administration After Death

- In both Haudenosaunee and Anishnabe culture, the practice is not to mention the name of the dead person
 - **Need to let the person go, mentioning his/her name is like calling the spirit back**
 - **Brings the person freshly back to mind, brings the grief forth**
 - **Say “the man who has just passed away” or mention him by his relationship to the family member**
 - **Do not ever refer to him as “the body”– he is still a person, just not one who is mentioned by name**



What else can the hospital & healthcare providers do to help?

- Telephone lists of indigenous healers/spiritual leaders
- Financial assistance
- Pamphlets publicizing that traditional ceremonies are welcomed and can be accommodated
- Staff training re traditions and importance of ceremonies
- Formation of a Spiritual Care Committee to create staff awareness, education and working relationship of mutual respect



In Conclusion...

- In most indigenous languages, hospitals are referred to as “the place where people go to die”
- A negative image that needs to change
- Image invokes feelings of distrust, non-compliance, fear, sometimes anger and usually resistance
- All of these emotions work strongly against healing

Together we can change attitudes, strengthen relationships and share the very best of practice