Celebrating Indigenous culture and heritage

In 1996, the governor general of Canada proclaimed 21 June as the official day to celebrate Indigenous culture and heritage, following calls from the National Indian Brotherhood (now the Assembly of First Nations) in 1982, the Sacred Assembly in 1995, and the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in 1995.[1] This is a day for Indigenous people and communities to celebrate Indigenous culture and heritage. It aligns with the summer solstice, which holds significance for Indigenous communities across Canada as a time of celebration, gathering, and harvesting. Non-Indigenous people are encouraged to participate in public events, support Indigenous businesses, and build their own cultural awareness and humility.

National Indigenous Peoples Day celebrates three distinct groups: First Nations (both status and nonstatus), Métis, and Inuit. *Indigenous* is used as an umbrella term for these three groups, which have distinct histories, cultures, and spiritual beliefs.[2] *First Nations* replaced the term *Indian*, which is still the legal term for someone registered under the Indian Act and having distinct rights associated with their Nation(s) of origin. Métis people are descendants of distinct communities that developed from the union between First Nations people and Europeans after contact. They developed their own unique language and cultural practices, and Métis people are descendants of these distinct communities. The Inuit are from the Arctic regions of Canada, the US, and Russia (Siberia). They also have a distinct culture and language that have connected them to and allowed them to thrive on their lands, which have some of the harshest conditions on Earth.

In recent years, the importance of understanding who Indigenous people are and who has the right to claim Indigenous heritage has become more important, due to several individuals who have claimed to be Indigenous when they were not. The slang term for people who falsely claim Indigenous heritage is *pretendian*. Mainstream media have picked up many stories of high-profile individuals who falsely claimed to be Indigenous, allowing them to benefit financially, academically, and professionally.[3] Due to Indigenous people being underserved and oppressed for generations, there are many programs and services across the health care, education, and social sectors designed to help reduce barriers for them. Pretendians occupy positions and take resources intended for Indigenous people, which is fraudulent and unethical. Another harm comes from increased mistrust and division among Indigenous people. The increased vigilance to validate people's identity can also cause harm, especially for those who have lost connection due to colonial harms like the Sixties Scoop.

Pretendians threaten Indigenous legitimacy and impose barriers for those reclaiming what was lost. Colonization resulted in a large percentage of Indigenous people dying, with those who remained being forced to relocate from their traditional lands, children being removed from their families, and our culture being outlawed. For many decades, Indigenous people hid their identities to avoid the racism and persecution that were common at that time.

These practices have led to generations of our people being disconnected from who they are as Indigenous people. To compound the issue, the Indian Act is an assimilation policy.[4] It was created to "manage the Indian problem" until there were none left. First Nations people have fought to address many of the systemic biases and sexism built into the Indian Act. Bill C-31 (1985) and Bill C-3 (2011) tried to address the gender discrimination and practices of disenfranchisement due to marriage, for example;[5] however, they also introduced the second-generation cut-off. This meant that when one person entitled to be registered parented with someone *not* entitled to be registered, the third generation was not entitled to registration. In her book *Becoming Kin*, Patty Krawec reviews in detail how colonial policies and laws like the Indian Act are designed to erase Indigenous people because of our inherent rights to what is now known as North America.[6] Our existence is an inconvenience and a threat.[7]

British Columbia has the most First Nations diversity in Canada, with 206 distinct communities, 36 distinct languages, and many more dialects.[8] The 21st of June is a time to celebrate the incredible diversity in BC and across Canada. Developing an understanding of the distinction between the various groups, their beliefs and practices, and their unique rights is an important step in developing cultural awareness and humility. ■

—Terri Aldred, MD

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Is medicine a calling? Or a career?

In today's world, is medicine still a calling, or has it become a career? For some physicians, perhaps it is both. For others, the distinction is blurrier than ever.

In the May issue of the *BCMJ*, in honor of National Physicians' Day, I wrote about Dr Emily Stowe, the first woman in Canada to openly establish a medical practice. She exemplified one version of what it means to follow a true calling. Despite persecution and tremendous personal sacrifice, Dr Stowe was unwavering in her desire to heal people.

I've heard more contemporary stories that echo this sentiment. *BCMJ* readers have shared experiences of caring for multiple generations of the same family, attending patients from birth to end of life, being on call 24/7, and serving as a pillar of the community—the sole physician in a small town.

I once heard a retired colleague reflect that, in his day, medicine wasn't just a job; it was an identity. He would ensure that "Dr" was engraved on his tombstone.

When I chose medicine, I believed I was following my passion. As clichéd as it sounds on medical school applications, I truly wanted to help people. We all do. But over time, experience has shown me that I was both naive and privileged not to have considered what life would look like in my thirties, emerging from 14 years of postsecondary education and training.

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The notion of medicine as a calling has contributed to a culture where financial discussions are often avoided. Talking about money became taboo, and, as a result, many physicians have had little to no financial education. In my time (*Oh gawd, did I just say that!?*), few medical students graduated with a clear understanding of earning potential across specialties. Practice management and financial literacy were virtually absent from the curriculum.

Today, burnout is widespread. While patient care demands are certainly a factor, other stressors—administrative burdens, overhead costs, regulation, and inadequate remuneration—contribute significantly. Medicine may be a career, but all too often, we're expected to treat it like a calling.

Many *BCMJ* readers have shared how conflicted they feel—torn between their commitment to their patients and the toll the job takes on their own health. The fulfillment that comes from helping others is still a powerful motivator, but it may come at the cost of personal well-being.

Physicians are now increasingly advocating for sustainability: part-time work, remote practice, shared call duties, and reduced administrative burden. These shifts are not about entitlement; they're about longevity. To continue delivering excellent care, the system must evolve to support the people within it. Ultimately, a health care system that values patient care *and* nurtures the passion for medicine will best ensure the calling endures for generations to come. ■

—Caitlin Dunne, MD, FRCSC

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