

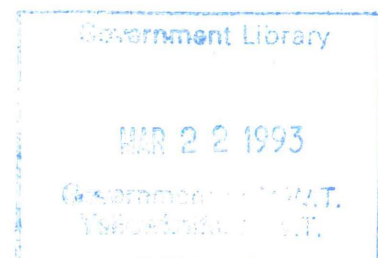
**MEETING THE NEEDS OF ABORIGINAL PEOPLES IN THE ADDICTIONS FIELD****BACKGROUND**

There are many First Nations in the Northwest Territories. There are Inuit, Dene, Metis and Inuvialuit, with each First Nation having many languages and dialects. These languages are recognized as Official by the Government of the NWT. While the Territorial Government has formally and officially recognized aboriginal languages, there are no formal commitments to providing for many governmental services that involve direct interaction with the Aboriginal public. There are, for example, no clear commitments to providing social services such as alcohol and drug counselling services in the Aboriginal languages, even though many of the programs funded and supported by the government are in Aboriginal communities and are geared toward Aboriginal clients.

Through formally recognizing our languages in the Act, the government is also recognizing that public governments should serve in the languages of the people they are elected to serve. The government is showing that they understand that many of the difficulties that Aboriginal people have in dealing with the government has been mainly due to language and cultural barriers.

Many government departments and agencies have taken measures to address language barriers. In many cases this has simply meant providing interpreting services. The use of interpreters however, is not effective when it comes to dealing with fundamental human conditions which involve the need for clear communications and that address individual emotional and psychological needs. The communication difficulties are compounded when individuals have lost their ability to express their feelings which is a symptom of chemically dependant individuals who seek counselling services.

As with most of the other cultures across the world, northern aboriginal Peoples have undergone many changes and attempts at assimilation into European or Euro-Canadian cultures. While assimilation has failed in many respects, these attempts have succeeded to a large extent in removing cultural pride and dignity of many of our people. We have many people, who for example, don't know what their culture is any more, and deny their identity because they have been taught that they are inferior peoples. Exposure to other cultures and societies whose main intent is cultural genocide has weakened many of our people. It is recognized around the world that language is an integral part of culture and that language contains cultural values, understandings



and concepts that are unique to that culture. The language of any culture also contains certain rules and protocol which guide and effect any interaction taking place. This protocol effects things like relationships between, and understandings of family, environment, age groups, community, and the sexes, etc. When any kind of communication takes place, proper language has to be used to show respect.

The high rate of addictions of our people is a symptom of cultural oppression and of the self hate that results. Cultural changes and cultural oppression has resulted in northern aboriginal people trying to escape the reality of their cultures disappearing (and therefore their identity, self worth and sense of purpose) by drinking alcohol, abusing drugs and adopting other abusive behaviour. While some of our people have also lost their language, there are still many aboriginal language speakers who communicate most effectively in their native tongue. Addictions treatment involves building on the strengths of clients, establishing and building on their communication abilities and helping them build a sense of self worth. They can no longer be made to feel that aboriginal cultures and languages are inferior.

In order for aboriginal people to restore their sense of self worth, they must develop a sense of identity, self worth and belonging. Culture provides this. Language and culture are one in the same and cannot and should not be separated.

A commonality between all northern Aboriginal Cultures is the close relationship to the natural environment. The northern aboriginal peoples have languages that are relevant to their way of life which is highly dependant on nature. When Europeans arrived, northern aboriginal cultures were exposed to new situations, experiences and things they had no experience with and, therefore, no language for. Our People had to develop terminology to communicate new concepts and experiences.

Over the past 50 years everything has changed so quickly that the northern aboriginal languages have not kept up with the needs to develop new terminology to communicate these new experiences. Along with many new positive developments, also came negative experience. Aboriginal Peoples were able to address the positive issues without much concern, however when it came to the negative aspects, it has been difficult. Substance addictions historically, for example, had not been part of the northern aboriginal culture but has since

become part of daily life for many of our people. Even so, there has not been clear and accurate terminology developed in the Aboriginal languages to treat people for their addictions.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

In the alcohol and drug and other addiction fields, when a person is afflicted by any addiction there is normally a lot of denial that there is a problem. The addicted person does not talk about the problem. It has also been proven that the family of the addicted person also suffer and are considered co-dependants. If there are enough families in a community that are affected by addictions it affects the whole community. The end result is that the whole community denies there is a problem and fundamental and underlying problems of communities are not discussed or addressed. Discussion may begin once things have got so bad at the individual or community level (they have hit rock bottom) that the people in the community cannot deny the problem any longer. Recovery can only begin by first acknowledging the addictions.

This denial phase is compounded by communication breakdowns because information is not available to people in their languages. The necessary northern aboriginal language terminology, in the addictions field, has not been developed. Critical information about the disease is, therefore, not available to Aboriginal speakers. Without information there is no understanding of what is happening to them and people cannot easily recognize the symptoms of addicted behaviour.

There are many community based alcohol and drug programs and a few northern alcohol and drug treatment centres operating with the assistance of the Government of the N.W.T.. Many northern aboriginal people are attending alcohol and drug treatment centres both in the N.W.T. and in other centres in the southern provinces. There seems to be some degree of success resulting from attendance at these Treatment programs. Some people are changing their lifestyle and abstaining from alcohol with the assistance of these support services.

In most cases, however, the people that are currently being successfully treated for alcohol or drug abuse, are people who speak and read the language in which the treatment centre is

delivering the treatment program. In all cases, this language is English. Even when the first language of a client is English it is difficult for a person who enters to understand the concepts they are presented. This is because they are not used to, as addicted people, expressing their feelings or understanding basic "normal" human behaviour. As well, those working in the addictions field have, to a large degree, developed a language of their own such as "co-dependant" and "denial". The information given to clients is not easily understood in the best of circumstances. If the client has a good command of the English language, the client may grasp the information given him in treatment, recognize that there is hope and that he has value as a person and change his lifestyle to remain sober. If however, the client speaks English as a second language, that client will not be able to understand the information he is given, will not be able to express his feelings or share his experiences effectively and may leave treatment feeling even more inadequate. This will be largely due to the fact that English is not the language of his heart for which he needs to use to express his feelings, and to his inability to grasp complex concepts in his second language.

When the above scenario is considered, it can be understood why many norther aboriginal clients who enter any treatment program go back to drinking alcohol or using drugs again. This adds to the clients feelings of helplessness and the experience may actually lend to the progression of the disease of alcoholism. It may also contribute to the client's feeling that there is no help available, and will be less likely to seek the help and support he needs.

THE WAY TO GO

Measures can and must be taken to mitigate the problem and give the aboriginal clients a fighting chance to recover from the disease of alcoholism and drug abuse.

These measures lie in the language and cultural components of any treatment program¹ delivered to northern aboriginal clients. In order for this to be addressed properly, the Government of the N.W.T. will have to adopt policies and develop the treatment programs to include all northern aboriginal languages and cultures.

¹reference to treatment program here on in, in this text means all alcohol and drug programs being delivered in the N.W.T.

Terminology Development

All people working in the addictions field with aboriginal clients will have to take responsibility to develop and contribute to the terminology needs of Aboriginal clients.

There are two ways to do this. One is to try to find Aboriginal words that are equivalent to English words and concepts. This approach has been used frequently in the north with limited success. The other is to find English words that are equivalent to aboriginal words and concepts. We believe that the latter approach will have greater meaning to Aboriginal peoples because it is building on what they know and understand.

Treatment Program

In treatment programs, as in any other program, resources are required to deliver programs. Both human and information resources are essential to providing services to those utilizing treatment programs. To address the needs of northern aboriginal clients, these resources will have to be available in the language of the client. The needs of the English speaking clients can be met with existing resources and programs. Treatment programs must however, be developed to reflect the cultures of northern Aboriginal clients and in the language of the client in order for the program to be effective.

Human Resources

The most immediate need that must be addressed, will be to develop the human resources. The counsellors who will be the front-line workers will have to be able to deliver the treatment programs in language of the client they treat. This means affecting hiring policies so that aboriginal languages become a qualifying requirement. It also means that language development needs of the Counsellors will have to be fully supported by governing bodies and built into training and work schedules. Terminology development work to meet the needs of the treatment clients and Counsellors will have to become a priority and a responsibility that the Dept. Of Social Services recognizes that it must accept. In practical terms they must add to support provided to treatment centres and local programs, that will enable the frontline workers to do the

developmental work needed with the assistance and active participation of Aboriginal elders. If the front-line workers cannot deliver the treatment programs in the appropriate client languages and cultural context, the clients will not be gaining the strength they need to stay sober.

Program Aids

Information resources are critical to the educational needs of clients. The use of reading material is widely used to help newcomers learn basic information about their problem. Because of the low literacy rate in the NWT, it is critical to have this information available orally, through audio and audio visual means in the Aboriginal languages. In southern treatment programs, information is available in english through written materials, audio recordings and videos. Without these aids in the aboriginal languages, treatment programs will not be effective because basic information will not be understood.

Conclusion

The Territorial Government has taken the preliminary steps needed to recognize Aboriginal language rights and their own responsibility to govern and provide services in the languages of the people they are elected to serve.

Providing for addictions services in the Aboriginal Languages will enable the vast majority of addictions clients to benefit in a meaningful way from the support offered by treatment centres and local drug and alcohol programs. Bridging the communication gaps through the use of a clients first language will re-enforce their sense of identity and self worth.

Strengthening the individual through ensuring cultural relevance will increase the chance of achieving and maintaining sobriety. Enabling Treatment Centres to provide services in Aboriginal languages will also increase their ability to involve elders, including unilingual elders, as Resource people in the programs of the centre.

Developing terminology based on aboriginal concepts will ensure greater meaning to information provided to Aboriginal speakers. Without this support the treatment programs will be of limited value in the treatment of northern aboriginal clients. The alcohol and drug problems of the north and in particular in Aboriginal communities, will prevail and will continue to grow and prevent us from becoming positive contributors to the development of the North. Not only will our people suffer but so will any effort by government to contribute to the social or economic development of the north.

We must address this critical issue now to avoid both the growing human and financial costs of social breakdown. The way to do this is to give meaning to the recognition to the Language Act by establishing operational policies that would ensure that critical services such as addictions counselling, are provided and supported by government and in doing so, also ensuring that the Human and Information resources are actively developed.
