

Views about Reviving Traditional Medicine in Waskaganish*

Purpose

In this thesis, Christine wanted to do two things:

1. Learn how people in Waskaganish feel about bringing back traditional medicines to treat diabetes; and
2. Understand how these feelings fit into the broader context of changes in people's cultural beliefs and practices.

She interviewed 11 people in Waskaganish, and did seven follow-up interviews. She also organized three focus groups.[†] The idea was to hear from three different groups: people living in Waskaganish, people from the Gravel Pit, and health workers. To be able to bring back traditional medicines, we need to know how all three of these groups feel about them.

Review of past research

What have other studies found out about preventing diabetes? Some of the main points are:

- First Nations people in Canada eat much less land food than they used to. This also holds true in Eeyou Istchee, although older Eeyouch eat more traditional foods than younger people.
- People all over the world have trouble controlling their diabetes. But First Nations people may face extra problems if the advice they are given does not fit with their culture. For this reason, at least seven culturally adapted programs have been created across North America. (One of these was a project to prevent gestational diabetes in Eeyou Istchee.) None of these programs has had much success. But perhaps a program that uses traditional plants would work better.
- Across Canada, more and more people are turning to herbal remedies. At the same time, the Cree Health Board is trying to combine traditional and western ways of healing. Taken together, these two trends may offer a good chance to bring traditional plants into diabetes care in Eeyou Istchee. But first we need to get people talking about the best way to do this. Christine's study was a first step in this direction for Waskaganish.

* This is a simplified summary of a Master's thesis by Christine Tabib, entitled *Understanding Cultural Adherence and the Use of Traditional Medicine in Waskaganish First Nation*. (Draft of August 2010, McGill University School of Dietetics and Nutrition.)

[†] The interview guides and plans were developed with help from the Public Health Officer and the community's Cultural Coordinator.

Changes in the way of life in Waskaganish

Christine found that over time, people in Waskaganish have changed their eating habits, their cultural practices, and the ways they use traditional medicines.

Changes in eating habits

People like the traditional foods, especially if they grew up with them. They believe that the meat gives you strength. People in Waskaganish still eat traditional foods, but these are now just a small part of their diet. Now that people have jobs, there is less time to hunt. Even the Elders don't spend as much time on the land as they used to, because they want to be near their children and grandchildren. Eating habits have changed, and people now snack regularly, usually on foods like pie, cookies, or toast. Instead of drinking meat broth or Labrador tea, they drink store-bought tea or coffee with milk and sugar. But some "southern" foods are still not a regular part of people's diets: when Christine asked people what they usually eat, only a few people mentioned vegetables.

Some people in Waskaganish have teepees in their yards so they can cook food the traditional way. But often people don't have time for this, so they cook their meat on a stove or microwave. Sometimes they mix traditional and new ways. For instance, some people cook rice or macaroni in meat broth. Or they add potatoes or vegetables to traditional meat stews.

Changes in cultural practices

The Elders have a lot of skills and knowledge about how to live in the bush. But it is not clear how much of this is being passed on to the next generations. Christine asked people about four different aspects of tradition:

1. Language

Almost everyone in Waskaganish can speak Cree. However, the Elders speak a version that uses a lot of words from the traditional way of life. The younger people speak a version that has a lot of English words in it.

2. The "walking out" ceremony and first snowshoe walk

These ceremonies were dying out, but people have been going back to them in recent years. Some families organize their own snowshoe walks. The school has been organizing one for the first-grade children.

3. Knowledge of traditional songs and dances

Most people—even Elders—told Christine that they don't know any traditional Cree songs or dances. Fiddle music and square dancing have come to be seen as traditional.

4. Sharing food with others

These days, people share food mainly with others in their immediate family. However, they still value the idea of sharing food. They feel that doing so shows honour and generosity.

Changes in use of traditional medicines

Even in the small group of people that Christine talked to, there were many different views on traditional medicines. These differences did not seem to depend on where the person had grown up (bush, community, or residential school) or on their religion. The fact that there are so many different views could make it harder to bring traditional medicines back.

People in Waskaganish distinguish between *healers* and *medicine-makers*. Healers, they say, use plants, ceremonies, and the old spiritual beliefs. *Medicine-makers* are simply people who know which plants to use as medicine, and how to prepare them. Many people are very ill at ease with the spiritual aspects of traditional healing (like sweat lodges or feeling a connection to the plants). But they are happy enough to learn about plant medicines. As one person explained, “There’s no harm in traditional medicine, it’s just the beliefs that come with it.”

Western medicine seems to have mostly replaced traditional medicine in Waskaganish. Everyone Christine spoke with said they see a doctor or nurse if they are sick. Many people said there is no healer in Waskaganish. People are not sure if the traditional medicines are safe. They also say these medicines were used for short-term problems like colds or infections, and might not work on long-term problems like diabetes. Most people would need to see the medicines work for a family member or friend before they would try them.

Despite all this, half the people Christine spoke with said they—or someone in their family—had used traditional medicines. Bear grease and castoreum were mentioned more often than plants.

Re-introducing traditional medicines

The discussions in the focus groups revolved around four main questions:

1. What do people know about traditional medicines?
2. Do people think these medicines could help with diabetes?
3. Should the clinic offer people access to traditional medicines?
4. If yes, what obstacles and benefits can be foreseen?

1. What do people know about traditional medicines?

In Waskaganish, western medicines have mostly replaced the traditional ones. The health care workers say they know nothing about traditional medicines, and would need training. The community members also say they know very little about the medicines. And they note that the youth don't believe in them. The Elders at the Gravel Pit know more about traditional medicines, and talked about some of them. They mentioned using

- Breast milk for snow blindness
- Charcoal as a source of calcium
- Animal greases or tamarack for rashes and burns
- Castoreum or tamarack for wounds.

The Elders say they are ready to teach others about traditional medicines, but that no one is asking.

2. Do people think traditional medicines could help with diabetes?

People are hesitant about using traditional medicines for diabetes. Even the Elders greeted the idea with a long silence. The Elders prefer to treat the symptoms of diabetes they can actually see, like foot sores. That way, they can tell if their treatment is working. It is harder to know if a treatment is working on something that can't be seen, like high blood sugar.

3. Should the clinic offer access to traditional treatments?

Should the clinic put people in touch with traditional healers? Overall, there seemed to be support for this idea. But the three groups have very different views on it:

- The Elders like the idea.
- The health workers are open to it, but first want proof that the medicines work. They also want to know if it is safe to mix traditional and western medicines.
- The community members are not sure the community is ready. They say that healers are out in the open in Mistissini, but not in Waskaganish. Some people worry that traditional medicines won't keep well — they need to be made fresh. Others fear that contaminants in the land could affect the medicines.

4. What obstacles and benefits can be foreseen?

What are the advantages and drawbacks of bringing back traditional medicines? The health care workers say it is good to give people choice. They point out that the traditional medicines are affordable. And they believe using these medicines would give people pride in their traditions. However, other people see some obstacles. They worry that much of the old knowledge has already been lost. They also say that the people with knowledge are often in the

bush, and hard to reach. And they think it would be better to start with a simpler illness than diabetes.