

From the CMO

April 30, 2026

Cultural awareness: A necessity, not an add-on

Dear Colleagues,

This week, I want to place a specific and deliberate emphasis on the work of the Indigenous Wellness Core within Primary Care Alberta (PCA) and the critical role it continues to play in informing our clinical practice, training and leadership across the organization.

Across Canada — and here in Alberta — the mortality gap experienced by Indigenous Peoples has widened in recent years, with evidence suggesting this trend accelerated during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. Declines in life expectancy, alongside higher burdens of chronic disease, mental health challenges and preventable mortality, are now well documented. These outcomes are not the result of biological difference, but rather the consequence of structural inequities, historic and ongoing harms, and health systems that have too often failed to meet people where they are.

At the same time, there is a growing and compelling body of evidence pointing toward effective solutions. Indigenous-led, community-driven and culturally informed models of care are consistently associated with improvements in access, trust, continuity, prevention uptake and adherence to care plans. Research from Alberta and across Canada demonstrates that when care is grounded in cultural safety, relational respect and Indigenous knowledge, patients experience stronger engagement, improved self-reported health and more holistic outcomes.

Culturally grounded care at PCA

This is not abstract or theoretical work — it is happening every day in Primary Care Alberta. The Indigenous Wellness Core plays a central role in shaping our ability to deliver safe, appropriate and culturally grounded care, while also influencing how we think about workforce development, clinical education and ongoing professional training. Cultural awareness is not an “add-on” to clinical care. It directly shapes how care is experienced; whether patients feel safe to seek care early; and whether treatment plans are practical, meaningful and sustainable. In this way, culturally informed primary care contributes directly to downstream outcomes, including improved chronic disease management, reduced avoidable hospitalizations and long-term health equity.

You can see this model playing out in spaces like the Indigenous Wellness Clinic in Edmonton, Elbow River Healing Lodge and others where an approach, grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing and being, informs holistic care. Sites such as these demonstrate how Indigenous-led and/or informed models of care can inform not only Indigenous health services, but the broader evolution of primary care practice across the system.

Importantly, the value of this work is not always well captured by traditional health-economic frameworks, which often struggle to account for collective wellbeing, relational continuity, cultural safety and intergenerational impact — concepts that are central to Indigenous understandings of health. Emerging scholarship challenges us to redefine how we measure value in healthcare and reminds us that investments in Indigenous-led care are investments in equity, sustainability and better outcomes for communities.



In parallel with clinical innovation, we continue to intentionally grow the operational and medical leadership within the Indigenous Wellness Core. This includes active recruitment to ensure the work is supported, sustainable and regionally responsive. I am particularly grateful to share that we have recently onboarded an additional Medical Lead for the northeast corridor, Dr. Kirk Reid, further strengthening our capacity to support teams and communities across the province.

I want to thank the Indigenous Wellness Core for their leadership, partnership and ongoing influence on Primary Care Alberta's clinical direction. Their work not only improves care today; it shapes who we are becoming as an organization and how we deliver primary care in Alberta.

In service,

Ernst

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