

DR. DEBBIE MARTIN: ADVANCING HOW WE UNDERTAKE INDIGENOUS HEALTH RESEARCH





Despite the devastating impacts of colonization, the richness of culture and community in Indigenous peoples in Canada endures. Ongoing challenges such as poverty, poor access to health care, food insecurity, contaminated drinking water and a history of trauma are directly linked to centuries of oppression, and yet, Indigenous communities' strength, resilience and perseverance are evidenced throughout the country.

Unfortunately, research has been a key means through which some of the worst examples of colonization have been enacted, and wherein Indigenous peoples' voices and concerns have been undermined, ignored and dismissed. In fact, many Indigenous communities report being 'researched to death', with little to no benefits accruing to their communities as a result of their participation in research. As it stands, Indigenous communities recognize the need for evidence-based data to improve health outcomes, but most are unwilling to participate in research that does not offer a direct benefit to their people and communities.

Undoubtedly, there is a need for research to be done differently when working to improve Indigenous health. This is the vision of the Wabanaki-Labrador Indigenous Health Research Network, led by Dalhousie's Dr. Debbie Martin, in partnership with Indigenous leadership. Alongside many community partners, Dr. Martin's team is prioritizing community relationships at every step of the way while working to address enduring health issues in Indigenous populations, including diabetes, chronic pain, oral diseases, mental illness and substance abuse. Employing integrative science models to draw on the strengths of both Indigenous and western perspectives, the proposed Wabanaki-Labrador Indigenous Health Research Network will focus on community engagement and the use of Indigenous 'ways of knowing' (methodologies) to inform the research process – from design to dissemination. The end goal is to improve the health and wellbeing of Indigenous peoples within the Atlantic region, by placing Indigenous communities at the centre of this process.

“If we are to address the major health crises that are affecting Indigenous communities today, we need to fundamentally alter our approach. This type of research – community initiated, directed and led – is how we create a new legacy of health research – one that offers real value and benefit to the Indigenous communities and nations that are involved.”

– DR. DEBBIE MARTIN

Canada Research Chair, Indigenous Peoples' Health and Well-Being and Associate Professor, Health Promotion, Dalhousie University.

BELOW: Participants at the Co-Learning Health Research Summit, an event to collectively and collaboratively develop the Wabanaki-Labrador Indigenous Health Research Network with Indigenous and allied scholars, community members, and partner organizations across Atlantic Canada



Dr. Martin's approach is based on growing evidence suggesting that when communities have been engaged in research from the outset, the research outcomes are respectful and relevant to communities, and therefore create lasting impact.

Competing to become one of nine regional Indigenous health research networks in Canada, funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the proposed Wabanaki-Labrador Indigenous Health Research Network will support mentorship and training opportunities for Indigenous students, capacity-building workshops, community-led research projects, research priority setting initiatives, and strategic communication and knowledge exchange for Indigenous health researchers in the Atlantic region. It will also facilitate the development of sustainable physical spaces within Indigenous communities to undertake community-based Indigenous health research, in a way that support communities in exercising sovereignty over what data is collected, how it is stored and how it is shared.

By leveraging support from DMRF donors, Dr. Martin and her team can secure highly competitive CIHR funding for this important initiative, and build toward a healthier future for Indigenous communities in Atlantic Canada.

“It is precisely because of our poor history of listening and learning from Indigenous communities, that we must get this right going forward.”

– DR. DEBBIE MARTIN

Canada Research Chair, Indigenous Peoples' Health and Well-Being and Associate Professor, Health Promotion, Dalhousie University

Elder Albert Marshall and Nick Mercer engage in meaningful conversation at the Co-Learning Health Research Summit, held at the Mi'kmaq Native Friendship Centre in Halifax



KEY NETWORK COLLABORATORS:

Dalhousie University, Cape Breton University, University of PEI, Mount Saint Vincent University, St. Francis Xavier University, Memorial University, Atlantic Policy Congress of First Nation Chiefs Secretariat, Mi'kmaq Native Friendship Centre, Canadian Aboriginal AIDS Network, Native Council of PEI, Mi'kmaq Confederacy of PEI, Union of Nova Scotia Mi'kmaq, Nunatsiavut Government, the National Collaborating Centre for the Determinants of Health, Canadian Centre for Vaccinology, Heart and Stroke Foundation, Healthy Population Institute, Research Nova Scotia, Centre for Water Resources Studies, NL SUPPORT, MSSU, Stewardly, Nova Scotia Health Authority