

Making the connection with Aboriginal culture

When Dr. Cornelia Wieman was an infant living on the Little Grand Rapids Reserve in northern Manitoba, the local Children's Aid Society came to her home and removed her from her family.

After being made a ward of the Crown, she was placed in various foster homes until a Dutch couple in Thunder Bay, Ont., adopted her. They were good parents and looked after her well, but even though the word "Aboriginal" never came up in her new home, Wieman knew in her heart that she came from a different culture.

"Being an adopted child, I grew up thinking it doesn't really matter where I'm from," she says. "I'm just who I am." She changed her mind as she got older and started reading about her culture. "I had the definite sense that I wasn't learning new material but I was taking on material that I already knew somehow but hadn't really connected with."

As Wieman read and learned, she began to get a sense of who she was and to feel more complete. Then, while attending medical school at McMaster University, Wieman received significant mentoring from Aboriginal doctors and began thinking about where she could do the most good. "As I went through my medical training, I realized that probably my greatest skills were not so much doing procedures but sitting and talking with people and listening to their stories," she says.

So she began thinking about practising psychiatry. At the same time, she was also coming to the realization that she should return to her original culture to practise. And that is the way Wieman became Canada's only practising Aboriginal woman psychiatrist. Today she works at St. Joseph's Hospital in Hamilton as a psychiatric emergency consultant and spends at least 2 days a week at a community mental health clinic on the Six Nations Reserve, southeast of Hamilton.

Recently she was appointed Native Students Health Sciences Coordinator at McMaster, a position funded through the Ontario government's Aboriginal Education and Training Strategy. As a McMaster graduate (1993) and Six Nations psychiatrist, the appointment made perfect sense.

Wieman is currently developing partnerships with Aboriginal communities and attempting to enhance university opportunities in the health sciences area for Aboriginal youth. She believes these young people may not be able to imagine themselves in the field because they haven't had

much exposure to physicians. They also may feel intimidated at the thought of leaving their communities — and culture — for the larger urban centres where doctors and other health professionals are trained.

Wieman knows how they feel. Her own experience of being taken from her family has also given her a unique insight in her clinical work. "In the 1960s, child-protection agencies took a lot of Aboriginal children out of their homes, and they were adopted into non-native families. That's seen in some circles as equally disruptive as the residential-school experience. In the 1960s, in Manitoba, something like a third of Aboriginal children were taken into care. That's part of the group that I'm from."

Wieman thinks Canada's old residential-school system is one of the major causes of emotional damage she sees among Aboriginal patients. "People are starting to talk about their experience and the damage that was caused. The individuals who attended these schools suffered, but the aftermath of these experiences is also showing up in the generations that followed."

She says a growing number of patients at the Six Nations clinic are now talking about residential schools and coming forward to seek help. She sees both survivors — ranging in age from 40 to elderly — and their family members. "Because of the abusive experiences they may have suffered in the residential schools and from being taken away from their community and forced to live under certain conditions, there seems to be a lot of disruption in family dynamics."

Wieman is already receiving recognition for her work. She has been awarded several academic and research scholarships, and in 1997 she was elected chair of the Native Mental Health Section of the Canadian Psychiatric Association.

Sometimes the demands on her time seem endless — she is continually being asked to speak across Canada — but Wieman tries hard to preserve her personal life. "I want to be doing this work for a long time so I try to take care of myself," she says.

Two years ago, Wieman and her husband moved to the Six Nations area and now live 10 minutes from the reserve. Both consider it their hometown. "It would be extremely rewarding to see the numbers of Aboriginal youth choosing the health professions go up over a number of years," she says. "And I hope one of them becomes a psychiatrist to take over from me when I retire." — *Ken Kilpatrick*, Hamilton



Ken Kilpatrick

Dr. Cornelia Wieman: knew in her heart that she was different