The National Aboriginal Health Organization’s Sexual Health Toolkit Part I and II

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The resource we selected is a two-part sexual health toolkit that teaches youth how to be sexually healthy, safe and responsible. The toolkit was developed in partnership with The Native Youth Sexual Health Network (NYSHN), an organization by and for Indigenous youth that works across issues of sexual and reproductive health, rights and justice throughout the United States and Canada. The first part of the toolkit focuses on sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and contraception whereas the second part discusses healthy relationships with oneself and others as well as sexual abuse and sexuality. This resource encourages open discussion and communication without judgement and incorporates several aspects of health (spiritual, mental and physical health). Each clan member began this assignment with an interest in health and an open mind about which resource to review. In the end, we chose to focus on sexual health as it is a pertinent issue facing Indigenous communities today. This resource in particular was engaging, easy to understand and well suited for youth. We felt that this resource could be well utilized in educational and social settings and could help promote sexual wellbeing in Indigenous communities while providing relevant information to all Canadians. This resource can be found at the following website: <http://www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com/toolkit.html>

The toolkit presents health in accordance with Indigenous perspectives. The toolkit takes a general approach to Indigenous knowledge by incorporating the element of wholism when discussing health and the definition of healthy relationships. Firstly, there are many types of relationships: the relationship with ourselves, with friends, families, a partner, our community, and Mother Earth. Relationships require certain qualities to be and stay healthy. Any kind of relationship (romantic or friendly) needs safety, respect, trust, communication, enjoyment and fairness. Good health is a balance of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual elements. The resource states that “good health is achieved when we live in a balanced relationship with the earth and the natural world”. Mother Earth provides food, air, medicines, laws and teachings. These principles are to be combined with an active lifestyle, a positive attitude, and peaceful and harmonious relations with people and the spiritual world.

The toolkit explains the traditional views on sexual health, where sexuality is an expression of the life-creating force. “In the past, sexuality was not perceived as shameful and children were taught openly about their bodies, sexual and reproductive passages, and moon time” according to the toolkit. Each First Nation carries different stories and teaching about sexual health. They have varied coming-of-age ceremonies or naming ceremonies. Before colonization, women were recognized as having a great power because of their ability to have children and this ability was honoured within the communities. Before colonization, sexual diversity was also accepted. In many Indigenous communities the existence of male-females and female males (two-spirited individuals) was recognized as having the social responsibility of carrying two spirits and this was considered a gift. Two-spirited people were respected and often became medicine people, healers, and visionaries. Moreover, rape and sexual aggressions against women were not an element of Indigenous culture. The resource outlines the effects of colonization such as loss of identity, loss of traditional beliefs and values and the continuing effects of residential schools. It exemplifies how this has all contributed to social problems within Indigenous communities, including sexual abuse.

There are many benefits to using this resource, especially when educating Indigenous youth. One main benefit is the layout of the resource as it includes large text, concise paragraphs, bullet points, tables, colourful images and eye-catching titles per section. These elements make the toolkit easy and engaging to read. The resource incorporates and addresses first person questions that readers may find themselves asking. It informs readers by assuming they have no previous knowledge of sexual health, while remaining respectful and non-patronizing. An example of how the resource does this is when it is explaining the process of STI testing; it addresses when an individual should be tested, what to expect when being tested and where testing can take place. Individuals accessing this resource can easily find answers to specific questions they may have by scanning the documents for titles that pertain to their needs. The resource includes information that is specific to Indigenous people, such as discussing insurance-related information specific to Status First Nations women in regards to birth control accessibility. It includes traditional sources of support such as community Elders when suggesting ways youth can confide in others. The toolkit makes it easy and clear for youth to detect if they are in an unhealthy relationship and provides practical advice for empowering oneself and improving self-image. The document features links to external resources where readers can gain more in-depth knowledge on each topic. It outlines the definition of drug facilitated sexual assault so that readers are able to name their experiences and access resources accordingly. The toolkit describes the impacts that colonialism and Western media have had on Indigenous ways of life, particularly self-image. However, it is careful not to blame Indigenous people and communities for the adverse circumstances they may find themselves in.

While we find this toolkit to be excellent and useful, we have also outlined a variety of challenges that may pose as barriers when using it as a teaching resource. The resource intends to be accessible to the many Indigenous Nations across Canada which can pose an issue when directing readers to relevant external resources, such a local grassroots organizations. Because of this general approach, it is difficult for the resource to provide information regarding nation-specific knowledge and traditions. While the toolkit touches on traditional views on sexual health and sexuality, such as an openness to discussing sex, it does not discuss traditional medicinal practices regarding birth control or fertility. The sexual assault section of this resource features some problematic language such as the term ‘victim’ as opposed to ‘survivor’. It’s inclusion of tips for keeping oneself safe from sexual assault implicitly suggests that sexual safety is the sole onus of an individual versus the fault of the perpetrator. The entirety of the resource features very gender-binary language that may make the information feel less relevant to gender-non-conforming or queer-gendered readers.

We brainstormed some suggestions for how this toolkit may be improved upon. We feel that an updated version of the toolkit should be released with updated statistics, language and stories. We feel that the toolkit would benefit from the incorporation of specific data regarding structural violence against Indigenous peoples, specifically the widespread violence against Indigenous women in Canada. It may be beneficial for the toolkit to incorporate specific suggestions as to how individuals can include spiritual and mental wellbeing into their sexual health practices. The toolkit could include a chart of birth control methods and related information to each method. A glossary could also be included to offer definitions for terms that readers may not be familiar with. It would be beneficial to include a section teaching Indigenous youth how to be assertive and how to advocate their needs and questions when interacting with medical care practitioners. Instructors utilizing this resource may be able to incorporate some of these changes within their own teaching practice.

This resource could be used in both formal classroom settings and within community teaching spaces across Canada. This resource can be adjusted according to where and when it is being utilized. Instructors should consider their audience and location when tailoring this resource and selecting supplementary teachings about sexual health. Instructors could preface this toolkit with information of local Indigenous history and sexual health practices as well as a discussion on the impacts colonialism has had in the area. Instructors could include current issues facing Indigenous peoples today as well as a discussion of the relationship between health and land. Instructors can discuss the relationship between traditional Indigenous health knowledge and the contemporary Western health care system. Depending on the age and maturity of the students, instructors may want to include a discussion on how the colonial health care system has served to oppress and assimilate Indigenous peoples (e.g. smallpox epidemic, forced sterilization, etc.) and the lasting intergenerational impacts that colonialism has had on Indigenous health.

Instructors may want to consider how they can utilize this resource within an Indigenous teaching pedagogy. Instructors might decide to deviate from the Western teaching techniques of reading and regurgitating information by providing alternative opportunities for learning while using this resource. For example, instructors can use more Indigenous methods of teaching such as story-telling, individual exploration and hands-on activities. Instructors could include individual exploratory assignments such as encouraging students to research and explore local Indigenous community organizations. This would be an opportunity for students to further their own knowledge and find resources that they may realistically access. Inviting community members, such as Elders or Indigenous volunteers, to speak to students could be a beneficial way to provide an alternative form of learning and to incorporate Nation-specific information. Instructors must take this last suggestion with a caution however: including Indigenous speakers does not relinquish an instructor of the responsibility to adequately teach their students and to incorporate Indigenous teachings in various ways.

We have devised a specific class activity that will interactively engage students while utilizing the toolkit. Firstly, instructors can divide the class into groups of 3 or more students, and then distribute cards to each group. Each card will contain a different scenario of an individual that is related to some aspect of the toolkit (e.g. an individual in an unhealthy relationship, an individual who does not access Western healthcare, etc.) and each group will read and discuss their card together. The groups will consider if the individual in their scenario is a healthy person or what is healthy/unhealthy about the situation. Students will be urged to consider what they learned from the toolkit when discussing their scenario. The class will then reconvene and each group will share their scenario and what they discussed/concluded about it. The instructor can then prompt class discussion by asking pointed questions related to each scenario (e.g. what role may colonialism play in the scenario, how could the toolkit be useful in the scenario, what role does Indigenous Knowledge play in the scenario, etc.). Students should be encouraged to contemplate how their own preconceived, Western ideals may have affected their views of the individual on their card. Instructors may wish to incorporate additional resources such as educational videos before starting the class discussion/debrief to reiterate specific points/direct discussion.

Wither this resource is used in formal or informal educational settings, with Indigenous or non-Indigenous students/instructors, it is an excellent toolkit for teaching youth about sexual health and wellbeing. The fact that it was made in conjunction with the NYSHN gives the toolkit an air of authenticity and relevance. This is a great resource to keep Indigenous and non-Indigenous youth in Canada sexually informed, safe and healthy.