REIMAGINING INDIGENOUS HEALTH: Moving Beyond the Social Determinants of Health

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While the social determinants of health framework introduces important consideration of proximal and distal factors that affect individual health, the model needs to be reimagined to fit the Indigenous context. From many Indigenous epistemologies, health springs from different factors, for example, traditional practices and cultural continuity. Health is a property of a community, and less a property of individuals. Health is about relationships with ancestors, future generations, and is specific to time and place. Reimagining, rather than incremental adaptation, will be necessary to extend the WHO social determinants framework to the Indigenous context. This poster examines several assumptions within the World Health Organization social determinants of health framework that might not fit the Indigenous community epistemologies and argues for a re-imagination of what strengthens Indigenous health and well-being in Indigenous communities.

The Social Determinants of Health

- Income and Education
- Physical Environment
- Tribal Governance
- Health Services
- Social and Economic Factors

Indigenous Social Determinants of Health

In recent years, researchers, health professionals, and others have begun to adapt the social determinants of health framework to Indigenous contexts. Much of this work has been done in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (7–18). Very little has been written to date about the social determinants of health for Indigenous communities in the United States (19, 20).

Regardless of location, the assumption behind these observations has been that Indigenous contexts may include social determinants that are absent in mainstream contexts or that operate in distinctive ways. These Indigenous social determinants of health are primarily distal factors such as social, political, economic, cultural, and environmental determinants (2–5, 19).

Assumptions in Social Determinants of Health Framework

Yet while identifying these other factors is an important agenda item in improving our understanding of Indigenous health, realizing healthy, sustainable Indigenous communities requires a broader overhaul of assumptions and frameworks. Figure 4 presents assumptions inherent in the WHO social determinants of health framework and potential avenues to transform the framework for each assumption, as discussed by the authors.

Reimagining Indigenous Health

The assumptions inherent in the social determinants of health framework that begins by asking what, for the peopled involved, constitutes a healthy community or society. In effect, the critique of the social determinants of health framework invites a redefinition of health itself.

- Are healthy communities merely aggregations of healthy individuals?
- Or is health something that at least in part begins at the community level?
- Do such factors as self-determination, community control over community life, cultural continuity, functional community organization, and competent governance, among others, foster improved health and well-being?

Figure 5. Assumptions In and Out Beyond the Social Determinants of Health Framework

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The positionality of the authors—diverse by culture, some Indigenous from a variety of Native Nations, some not; students, scholars, political activists, public health social workers—are well-acknowledged. The construction of the thoughts presented here. The ideas emerged from the convergence of each author’s contribution based on their position in the world and the group of authors. Thus, these concepts represent different perspectives formed into shared ideas.