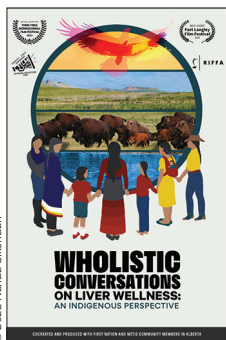




## Film

# An Indigenous First Nations perspective on liver health



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Wholistic Conversations on Liver Wellness: An Indigenous Perspective is available at <https://cumming.ucalgary.ca/resource/echo/home>

“Wellness is a story”, begins Alice, an Îethka Nakoda First Nations Knowledge Keeper, in a gentle, wise voice, setting the tone for the rest of the film *Wholistic Conversations on Liver Wellness: An Indigenous Perspective*. Created with the aim of reaching Indigenous communities in Alberta, Canada, on the topic of liver health, with a particular focus on hepatitis C, this film combines the clinical understanding of Western medicine with the wisdom and holistic attitude to health held by Indigenous communities to incorporate traditional storytelling ways of passing on knowledge into modern media. The result is a completely unique perspective on liver health.

At the start of this story, community Elders or Knowledge Keepers of several First Nations—Alice, Doreen, Maurice, Edmee, and Harley—speak about the liver, in Nakoda called the *tapi*, with reverence. They relate the importance of the liver from a spiritual and cultural perspective, telling stories about traditional healing and wellness practices (dandelion tea with milk thistle as a liver cleanse), recounting how communities come together to talk about their health, and comparing our bodies, especially our liver, with those of animals. “The liver is absolutely critical...I always say it’s like a carburettor. It filters out everything in our body”, says Doreen. “The Elders used to say how sacred, how fragile, and how delicate the *tapi* is”, continues Alice. “So we all have a responsibility to look after our *tapi*.”

Inspired to co-produce this film in collaboration with Indigenous communities as part of her doctoral programme, the creator Kate Dunn—who herself is Indigenous, with Mississauga First Nation ancestry—speaks to *The Lancet Gastroenterology & Hepatology* on her experience. Having spent time with Elders in the community, she found that, from their perspective, there was “nothing out there” that helped them to “engage with community members, to increase awareness, and engage the heart”. Indigenous community members might approach current medical messaging with distrust, stemming from a long history of colonial abuses, cementing the need to engage Indigenous people and perspectives in discussions about their own health. With this in mind, Kate reached out to one female and one male Elder from each of four treaty areas or Métis groups in Alberta, Canada, focusing on those without a medical background, such as teachers, police officers, social workers, and cowboys, who could help to reshape the cold, clinical, medical messaging. Spending time within communities, participating in traditional ceremonies, and fulfilling gift giving and tobacco protocols, Kate built relationships and trust, which translated into a greater willingness to work on this project together.

The film progresses onto the heart of the story: the stories of those in the Indigenous community who have struggled with

liver health. Mercedes, a peer counsellor, recalls a bad case of withdrawal; her mother encouraged her to light a smudge (a traditional practice of placing plant leaves in a special container, setting them on fire, and raising prayers with the smoke). “I remember just weeping out loud and saying that I don’t want to die”, she says, heartbreakingly. Her aunt, a nurse in the community, was the one to connect her to the treatment she needed when she overdosed, and it was then that she was diagnosed and treated for hepatitis C. She is not alone; Eithan, another member of the community, talks about how he had turned to substance misuse as a coping mechanism. He recounts the stigma within the community, and how it was the nurses and doctors around him who supported him. “Every person in this world is worth it”, he says, highlighting one of the core messages of this film: that each individual is important, that their health is a priority, and that they owe it to themselves, to others, and to their community, to heal.

Haley, a medical student, in a white lab coat and stethoscope, and Bonnie, a registered nurse—both Indigenous—relate the clear facts on hepatitis C: what it is, the damage it can do, how you can get infected, and the importance of getting screened. But their overall message is one of hope: “There’s a cure...your liver can heal. This is something that can happen to anyone. You do not deserve it.”

Already this production is doing precisely what it was created to do. Indigenous communities in Canada have been holding screening events—where they both screen the film and screen people for hepatitis C, as well as sharing it between themselves and at community health fairs, in high school classrooms, and clinic waiting rooms. Kate tells *The Lancet Gastroenterology & Hepatology* how people have already approached her in the hopes of producing similar films on fatty liver, cancer, diabetes, and menopause. “I hope it becomes a catalyst to inspire lots of transdisciplinary people to work together and involve young people and involve Elders, and really shift how we approach and share health awareness messages”, she states.

The conclusion of this story is a holistic one; an emphasis on how all aspects—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual—should be considered in liver health. The film is a world apart from the straight-to-the-point medical messaging the Western world is used to. It is its soul and its kindness that draws you in, and that might be the key to its brilliance. Considering how successful this method of communicating has been among the communities it aimed to engage, this film should encourage others creating medical messaging to actually take the time to listen and learn from the communities at the heart of it all.

Asma’a Adjerid