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U of S researchers partner with Aboriginal leaders to explore the power of culture to heal addictions

A team co-led by University of Saskatchewan researcher Colleen Anne Dell has been awarded nearly \$1.2 million to examine the practice of traditional First Nations culture as a healing force within substance abuse programs, and develop tools to better understand and measure the impact of these cultural practices.

“While there is discussion that cultural interventions have a positive impact in helping people deal with their addictions, there is little empirical data,” says Dell, who holds the University of Saskatchewan Research Chair in Substance Abuse. “By creating understanding of what practices work and how they achieve success, we hope to improve health programming for First Nations peoples struggling with addiction.”

The project, entitled “Honouring Our Strengths: Indigenous Culture as Intervention in Addictions Treatment” will receive \$883,000 from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and \$300,000 from Health Canada - First Nations and Inuit Health Branch.

Dell is working in partnership with the Assembly of First Nations, Centre for Addictions and Mental Health and National Native Addictions Partnership Foundation (NNAPF). The research team will examine how traditional culture is understood and practiced at selected National Native Addictions Drug Abuse Program and Youth Solvent Addiction Program treatment centres. They will also develop and test an instrument to measure the impact of cultural interventions on client wellness.

“A unique strength of this research is that it honors the cultural evidence base held within the tradition of First Nations people and by doing so, recognizes a different source of knowledge development,” says NNAPF Executive Director Carol Hopkins.

This latest success builds upon the results of a joint University of Saskatchewan and NNAPF project released today at the national Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) gathering in Saskatoon.

The project, funded by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Health Drug Funding Treatment Program, created DVDs and “Journey Magnets” to share the stories of people from across the province about how Aboriginal culture has helped them, or someone they know, on the journey of healing from addictions. The resource materials are available free to the public.

“People shared their experiences in ways that were meaningful to them, including poetry, written stories and videos,” Hopkins says. “It was important to all of them that the strength of Aboriginal cultural practices be shared.”

Seven knowledge ambassadors are working throughout the summer to distribute the resource materials and support Aboriginal people in their healing journeys. People's stories demonstrate how choosing a healthy sense of self as an Aboriginal person is an important element of recovery.

"This is an exciting time for our team to give back to individuals, communities and organizations what others in the province have shared," Dell says. "The timing with the TRC and hearing individuals' voices in this project fit together very well."

For example, in one video, Elder Betty McKenna teaches about the necessity of connecting with Mother Earth for healing. In another, Stacey Swampy describes how culture, traditions and Elders enabled him to turn his life around and how he, in turn, helps others. All stories are also available online at <http://www.tinyurl.com/cultureasintervention>.

"It's wonderful to be able to share the outcomes of the project in ways that people can use to continue the conversation," says project coordinator Holly McKenzie. "People may want to watch the videos with their family, show them at an addictions treatment centre to offer clients hope or have them as part of health care practitioners' training to raise cultural awareness."

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For more information or to order DVDs and magnets, please contact:

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