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PSYCHIATRIC CONSULTATIONS WITH INDIGENOUS PEOPLES: DIFFERENCES IN BELIEFS ABOUT MIND AND MENTAL HEALTH AND LESSONS LEARNED

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North American people have different beliefs about mind and mental health than conventional biomedicine. The author reports the results of 300 consecutive psychiatric consultations in Northern Canada during which he characterized the particular beliefs of his consultees. In their views, disease is located in relationships, including relationships with family members, with food (plants and animals), minerals, other people, spirits, the environment, and more. When these relationships are distorted and out of balance, dis-ease ensues. Traditional healers see the changes found in autopsies as footprints of the illness and not the illness itself. From this perspective, traditional healers engage in very different diagnostic procedures than conventional physicians. They seek the areas of disharmony and imbalance in relationships rather than looking for diseases in physical tissues. From this point of view, each person becomes their own story about their suffering and the treatment relates to that story as it unfolds to all the stakeholders in that story. The treatment becomes a story that merges with the illness-person story to move in a direction of balance and harmony. Every treatment is different because every person is different. There is no treatment for arthritis, only for the individual people who suffer. In this presentation, we will consider how to practice psychiatry within this environment, including the matching of biomedical stories to traditional stories and the negotiation of treatment approaches in such a manner as to maximize respect for traditional belief systems and also to optimize potential for outcome.