

## Traditional First Nations Healthcare

Throughout North America, indigenous peoples living in traditional times viewed illness as a negative or evil intrusion into the body. In eastern Washington and south-eastern British Columbia, the Salish tribes (including the local Sinixt) identified illness as caused by either natural or supernatural circumstances. These Salish people believed that faith or expectations could cure or kill a person, and that a person's conduct could affect his or her health.

Health treatment always focused more on the person rather than on the symptoms. This involved 1) the use of plants (with approximately 50% of all plants gathered by Salish tribes being for medicinal use) Women believed that the 'medicine song' used while gathering, as well as the specific location of the plant both influenced the effectiveness of a cure; 2) the guidance of a 'curing shaman'. The shaman could be either a male or a female and acted as a liaison between the sacred and secular worlds, drawing on supernatural powers to extract illness and prophesize health.

The following account of a young Sinixt girl's near-death in about 1825 illustrates a healing experience that includes both. "Seeptza" or "Able-One" was 8 years old and suffered from diphtheria. Many decades later, in her memoir *In the Stream*, her granddaughter Nancy recounted Able-One's life threatening childhood illness and successful treatment: a poultice of wild celery (*Lomatium ambiguum*), followed by a visit from a shaman:

*At dawn Able-One's mother took a grass bag and tramped to the barren hills north of the camp and brought back a load of wild celery roots. There was a new force that gripped her being and led her to do what she was about to do....After thorough cooking the roots were broken and crushed into pulp and bound to Able-One's throat while yet hot and juicy. The sharp, penetrating odor seemed to flood her being, giving quick relief to head and throat. Within half an hour, sleep had wrapped her small body....*

*[The shaman] was covered with a buffalo robe and goose down was brushed into the fur. A set of buffalo horns crowned his head while his face was blackened and striped in a hideous grin....There was a sudden tug at her covers and the terrible creature peered at her. She was amazed to hear a gentle voice announce that she would live to bear four sons and many daughters. The wise doctor smelled the odor of roots and....openly commended the treatment....*

*Able-One came back from the rim of the distant hunting ground, healed in body, happy and unafraid....*

## Sweat Lodge

*“We believe prayers are strongest when a person is clean as possible.”*

- Andrew Joseph Sr., Skoyelpi/Okanagan elder

*“A good winter sweat always made my bones want to move.”*

- Spokane elder

In Plateau Culture, Sweat Lodge was a sacred being that played an important role in mental and physical health. Each extended family had its own ‘sweat,’ with earth-covered lodges like this one lasting for many years.

Men and women used a sweat lodge daily, but never together. A shallow pit in the lodge held basalt stones that were heated in a fire outside and rolled or carried inside. Water was sprinkled onto the stones from a water-tight cedar root basket or deerskin bag and sometimes, plants with healing properties were added to the rocks. The first sweat was usually social, a second round cleansed more deeply and a third round entered the realm of the sacred.

Bodies were rinsed in nearby streams at the end of each sweat. Sweating was often accompanied by the low singing of each individual adult’s power song, the music associated with his or her guardian spirit. Adolescents sweated daily for weeks to prepare for their guardian spirit passage to adulthood, gradually increased their tolerance of the intense heat.

- Eileen Delehanty Pearkes

sources:

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