



The Crossroads of the Planetary Health Paradigm: An Indigenous Perspective

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The *Planetary Health* movement is gaining significant traction in and around universities and organizations in North America and abroad. The Movement can be differentiated from the *One Health* paradigm, which recognizes that the health of people is connected to the health of animals and the environment,¹ fitting into the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) mandate of preventing zoonotic infections and dealing with anti-microbial resistance for example.

The Planetary Health paradigm attempts to be more holistic as it includes a broader connection to the ecosystem and climate change. However, both movements promote a breaking down of traditional silos with the goal of “collaborative, multisectoral, and transdisciplinary”¹ approaches at all levels of governance, research, and policy making.

In 2014, the Rockefeller Foundation and the medical journal *The Lancet* created the Commission on Planetary Health to better explore the scientific basis for what was considered a new transdisciplinary field merging human health with global environmental change.² This newly formed commission’s report called for the “training of [I]ndigenous and other local community members” to “help protect health and biodiversity” (p. 2007). This call was imbalanced without an equally loud call for the training of the (socially dominant) westernized in-groups by Indigenous groups to help protect health and biodiversity³ and created an unexpected division, often unknowingly, in Indigenous circles. More inclusive knowledge was included later by way of recommended training of Indigenous and other local community members as primary healthcare workers, while respecting their local knowledge and culture stating that this *can help protect health and biodiversity*.⁴ Regardless, the complete lack of Indigenous traditional knowledge (TK) incorporated into current planetary health paradigms is a continued underestimation and appreciation of that knowledge base.

Planetary Health is by no means a new innovative discipline, as is often suggested in academic circles, but is a deeply rooted connection that all our ancestors had to the land as a medicine place. To understand the planet and its functions is to understand oneself

in the Indigenous worldview. As Fiona Livingstone, who manages a suicide prevention programme at the University of Newcastle’s Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, says, “If the land is sick, you are sick.”⁵ You cannot have one without the other, the planet, place, and people are interconnected in a dynamic interface of ever-changing evolution together as one. If the Planetary Health movement is to be successful, it will need to platform itself as more culturally competent and critically conscious, and have a greater appreciation of marginalized voices.⁶

What does “transdisciplinary” actually mean in the context of Planetary Health? In the context of the Indigenous lens, it is bridged upon the realities of the world and universe in which we live. From the smallest particles on the planet described in the field of physics, enlarging into the context of living entities via genetics, to biochemistry, to physiology, to biomechanics, and then to the merging and interaction with the outside world of dietetics, microbiology, psychology, and the natural environment, and growing ever larger, to the universe from a space-occupying status, we are then brought back to our fundamental particles and where we came from—the circle of life is then complete.⁷ This circular Indigenous worldview based on interdependence and relationality to all living and non-living things provides the expanse of Western-based transdisciplinary science.

One of the founding naturopathic principles is to *treat the whole person*, with the common identification being that you cannot separate the body into sections and parts. This applies also to the complex universe, where everything is interdependent and a wide view is needed—not the intention to treat per se, but to allow nature to take care of itself, free from manipulation and intervention; that is, let nature heal itself. Simply by letting Mother Earth be, she will begin to rebound. By continually trying to extract from her, use her, manipulate her, she will continue to cycle out of balance—not unlike a human body going against its natural requirements for healthy food, air, water, social connection, and love. The relationality to the mother of all things has not necessarily been lost in the modern Planetary Health movement, as it was never a part of it from the beginning. This needs to change to have the best hope of success for the future seven generations to come.

So what is the role of naturopathic doctors in this newly recognized Western-based field? *The Lancet* commission has stated correctly that, “[h]ealth professionals have an essential role in the achievement of planetary health: working across sectors to integrate policies that

advance health and environmental sustainability, tackling health inequities, reducing the environmental impacts of health systems, and increasing the resilience of health systems and populations to environmental change."⁴

The Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE) has taken a leadership role in climate action in Canada, with a track record of impressive policy changes achieved,⁸ including but not limited to the successful push to have the Canadian Medical Association divest from fossil fuels.⁹ The Practice Green Health organization in the United States has been pushing to transform “health care worldwide so that it reduces its environmental footprint and becomes an anchor for sustainability and a leader in the global movement for environmental health and justice.”¹⁰ The Canadian Nurses Association has put out a formal position statement on climate change;¹¹ in addition, the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions released a comprehensive discussion paper, *Climate Change and Health*, with a formal call for nurses to act.¹²

Currently, there is no formal organization, position statement, or plan of action within the naturopathic community at large. Naturopathic doctors (NDs) are poised to work from a holistic paradigm when helping give voice to climate change and its consequences on human and planetary health. NDs are also primed to help advocate for Indigenous-led discourse on environmental stewardship with the land, water, and sky as a medicine place. Our medicine sits on the back of Indigenous communities the world over, and we have a formal responsibility to ensure the protection and sacredness of those healing domains remain rooted in a healthy planet and environment.

The Indigenous Elders tell us that we cannot claim to have a right to clean water without doing anything to protect that water and we cannot claim to have a right to clean air without doing anything to protect that air. Water for example in the Indigenous worldview is a living entity and has the same rights as humans to exist in a balanced and healthy state. Therefore, this is a formal call to action for the naturopathic community and profession to stand up and lead the way in sustainable practice, environmental stewardship, cross-cultural reverence, and multidisciplinary leadership rooted in both TK and modern research. The ecological grief increasingly felt by many is a “natural and legitimate response to ecological loss, and one that may become more common as climate impacts worsen;”¹³ however, we must come together as a community as without community we really will be lost. *We can* be very powerful together in our action working for the planet in the same way we do with people—holistically.

The syndemic model of health focuses more specifically on the “biosocial complex, which consists of interacting, co-present, or sequential diseases and the social and environmental factors that promote and enhance the negative effects of disease interaction.”¹⁴ In essence, we are on the edge of having a synergistic epidemic (“syndemic”) from planetary change that Indigenous elders in the

Northwest Territories have been talking about for decades. From the awakening of hidden diseases trapped in permafrost¹⁵ to the tilting of the planet’s axis due to the polar-cap melt¹⁶ to the sinking of the ground around them due to sumps forming from permafrost melt,¹⁷ the Dene Elders knew about these events decades ago and talked specifically about these coming changes. From having a pure reverence for the land, the true reality becomes clear through the lessons given by the water, animals, sky, and through ceremony, leaving the responsibility to us to learn from those lessons and enact change for the progression of humanity.

The World Health Organization’s Ottawa Charter (1986)¹⁸ is a must-read road map for NDs and other health professionals outlining steps and opportunity available for applied engagement to the planetary health movement. The charter specifically recommends advocacy (including political advocacy), in addition to mediation (health personnel have a major responsibility to mediate between differing interests in society for the pursuit of health¹⁸), which culminates into specific actions detailed in the reference. The Canmore Declaration: Statement of Principles for Planetary Health¹⁹ is also a great resource for information with a more holistic understanding of the movement and its potential application for action.

Both inVIVO Planetary Health (www.invivoplanet.com) and the Planetary Health Alliance (www.planetaryhealthalliance.org) hold open annual conferences and support discourse and publication in this area. In addition, the Indigenous Climate Action organization (www.indigenousclimateaction.com) is an Indigenous led self-determined organization with the goal of uplifting Indigenous worldviews and experiences within climate discussions.

Getting involved in the climate change discussion has never been easier with grassroots initiatives popping up around the country. In the Indigenous world view our responsibility lies to the next seven generations and there is hope that after some drastic changes that *will* come to our planet, humans will once again wake up to their responsibility. As the much-repeated proverb goes: *We Do Not Inherit the Earth from Our Ancestors; We Borrow It from Our Children.* 🌱

About the Author

Dr. Nicole Redvers, ND, MPHc was the first licensed practicing naturopathic doctor in North America who is Dene (a member of the Deninu K'ue First Nation Band). After growing up in Canada's isolated north, she pursued an advanced Western medical education in the south and has had the privilege of developing relationships with strong elders and medicine people. She has traveled the globe, studying traditional medicine systems in various countries and working with Indigenous patients, helping to bridge the gap between traditional and modern medical systems. In addition, Redvers developed Northern Canada's only integrative medicine clinic from the ground up. She also co-founded and currently chairs the Arctic Indigenous Wellness Foundation, whose purpose is to revitalize traditional wellness services in the Canadian north with a focus on the preservation of Traditional Medicines. Her foundation was awarded one million dollars as a Laureate of the 2017 Arctic Inspiration Prize to work with homeless people and those most at risk in the northern part of Canada. Dr. Redvers is a published author of the trade paperback, *The Science of the Sacred - Bridging Global Indigenous Medicine Systems and Modern Scientific Principles*, is a mentor with the Jane Glassco Northern Fellowship program and is a merit scholar at the Dartmouth Institute of Health Policy and Clinical Practice. She is currently assistant professor at the University of North Dakota's Community and Family Medicine Department's Indians into Medicine program.



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