

Report from **The International Symposium
on Public Policy and Traditional
Health Systems** *Ottawa, Canada*

Indigenous people, doctors, traditional and Western researchers from the diverse traditions of Asia, Africa and the Americas met in Ottawa, Canada to discuss policy models and experiences, the revival of traditional knowledge and practice, biodiversity and intellectual property rights.

The symposium, held on March 2-4 at the International Development and Research Center in Ottawa, Canada (IDRC) followed a series of related meetings such as the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO) conference on "Health and Indigenous People of the Americas" held with support from the IDRC in Winnipeg, Canada in April 1993. PAHO's Board of Directors, made up of the Public Health ministers from every Latin American country, adopted a significant resolution based on the recommendations of this conference.

This resolution serves as an important tool for indigenous people in each country when demanding the right to practice traditional medicine as well as official support for improved healthcare in our communities. The resolution approved on September 28, 1993 credited indigenous communities' aspirations for control over their institutions and way of life, and their need to strengthen their own identity. It also recognized that indigenous communities have contributed significantly to health & nutrition of society, and the maintenance of ethnic, cultural and biological diversity. The resolution also based itself in respect for the values and social, cultural, religious, and spiritual practices of indigenous people including those which are related to the maintenance and improvement of health and the treatment of illnesses. PAHO urged member governments to

Photo: Wara Alderete



Offerings being made to Pachamama (Mother Earth) in Jujuy, Argentina



promote Indigenous people's participation in all health policy affecting them; promote of prevention programs especially in regard to the health of the indigenous people; assist in the evaluation of the initiative of the Health of the Indigenous People of the Americas; and to establish an expert commission which would include Indigenous representatives and be charged with developing strategies and projects to improve Indigenous people's health care.

Divergent perspectives on research policy

Indigenous representatives and western researchers voiced very different perspectives on research. Researchers from the National Cancer Institute in the United States described the "Biodiversity Project" in which they are isolating chemical compounds from medicinal plants in the search for a cure to cancer or AIDS. Their statements were criticized by the indigenous representatives for not taking into account the true value of traditional medicine which is based on an understanding that a cure is found in all aspects of the plant—not just in an isolated component. This western model was also criticized for its lack of spirituality, in the sense that a cure is not just a biological action but is also a strengthening of the spirit, something which is not found in a chemical substance.

Indigenous people also voiced con-

cern over the exploitation of our medicinal plants in order to serve the interests of developed countries and their pharmaceutical companies. This exploitation can result in environmental devastation as well as destroy our communities' cultural and social structure through the introduction of a mercantile system. A call was made for the development of research methodologies that are a) participatory, b) sensitive to the indigenous cosmology and respectful of their traditional health systems c) serve the needs of the local communities rather than foreign research institutions or companies d) evaluate the cost efficiency of traditional medicinal systems based in social values and spiritual traditions not just on western values, and f) to work within ethical bounds where research goals and uses are clearly stated.

Official Health Policies

In some Asian countries such as China and India, traditional medicinal practices have been preserved as a significant component of national health policy. Researchers expressed concern with respect to the integration of traditional and Western medicine, citing the negative impact official regulations may have on traditional practices; as well as the possibility that the Western system could dominate the other. The Chinese and Indian governments, for example, removed cosmology and spirituality from traditional medicinal

practice, so as to regulate or use these practices at their convenience.

Various indigenous representatives expressed their preference for an official position of tolerance, which would allow continuation of traditional practices without direct governmental interference or regulations. There was a general consensus that social control over traditional practices arise in each community, as it has been for thousands of years.

Despite cultural differences, spirituality seemed to be the common thread uniting the majority of traditions. Spiritual, mental and physical well-being are integral components fused together in traditional curing practices. Traditional health systems are sciences in their own right and, if they are to be understood, this basic principle must be respected.

It is imperative that indigenous communities and organizations continue to actively participate in this process by analyzing and influencing the policies that affect all aspects of life in our communities. ♡

This article was based on the PAHO's "Health of Indigenous Peoples" and a report by Jerry Bodecker, to whom we wish to express our gratitude.

To receive the PAHO document "Health of Indigenous Peoples" HSS/SI-LOS-34, write to: 525 23 Street N.W., Washington D.C. 20037, U.S.A., or the PAHO office in your country.