



Opinion letter
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Forced sterilizations: actions to regain trust

The publication of a research report on free and informed consent and forced sterilizations of First Nations and Inuit women in the fall of 2022 sent a shockwave. It described the unacceptable situations experienced by some thirty First Nations and Inuit women, in Quebec, over the past few decades. Some of them confided that they had undergone gynecological or obstetrical procedures without their knowledge; others described the pressure exerted by medical staff to consent to sterilization. These difficult, situations had significant consequences for these women.

The report made several recommendations, notably to the Collège des médecins du Québec, which undertook to follow them up through a think tank made up of physicians and three First Nations members. A concrete action plan has been drawn up to curb these reprehensible acts. As members of this group, we are pleased with the seven actions proposed. They are the first step towards real change.

A seven-point plan

In its report, the thinking group put forward seven recommendations to rebuild Aboriginal women's trust in the College:

- Deploy an action plan to tackle the issue of sterilizations and abortions imposed on First Nations and Inuit women;
- Add a preamble to the Code of Ethics for Physicians to color the understanding of all its articles and forbid discrimination based on culture and identity;
- Make basic training in cultural safety in health care mandatory for the College's professionals working in its Investigation and Professional Inspection Departments;
- Promote this training among all physicians;
- Review and improve the content of training on consent to care;
- Inform the public and physicians about the initiatives implemented by the Collège des médecins;
- Deploy reproductive health awareness tools in collaboration with First Nations and Inuit networks.

Regaining trust

These gestures of cultural humility are aimed at rebuilding bridges with communities that are too often marginalized within the healthcare network. There is no magic solution for rebuilding a broken bond of trust. But we believe it's never too late to take the first step.

The primary mission of the Collège des médecins is to protect the public. To fulfill this role, situations deemed problematic must be reported to the Collège. Caregivers who witness

inappropriate behaviour or actions also have a responsibility to report them. The voices of First Nations and Inuit women must continue to be at the heart of research into issues that concern them closely. While some of the mistakes of the past cannot be corrected, the present is in our hands. It is by sharing our knowledge and expertise, and above all by breaking the silence, that common solutions will emerge. Together, we shall try to make the words “Never again” a reality.

Mauril Gaudreault, M.D., President of the Collège des médecins du Québec

Suzy Basile, Professor at the Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue, Canada Research Chair on Aboriginal Women's Issues and co-author of the report Free and Informed Consent and the Forced Sterilization of First Nations and Inuit Women in Quebec.