Traditional culture reduces prescription and illicit drug problems for urban Aboriginals in Alberta

A new study by a University of Lethbridge researcher has found that urban Aboriginal adults who embrace traditional culture are less likely to experience drug problems.

Dr. Cheryl Currie, an assistant professor in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Lethbridge, collected data from almost 400 Edmonton-based Aboriginal Canadians. The study results, recently published in the prestigious journal Social Science & Medicine, suggest Aboriginal cultural practice is associated with reduced prescription and illicit drug problems for urban Aboriginal adults.

“More than half of all Aboriginal Canadians live in cities”, says Dr. Currie, lead investigator of the study. “In fact, Aboriginal peoples are urbanizing rapidly around the globe, yet we know little about factors that support Aboriginal health and well-being in cities.”

Results suggest Aboriginal adults with strong ties to traditional activities had higher self-esteem, and this helped explain why engaging in cultural traditions was protective.

“But statistically, increased self-esteem did not explain the protective effect entirely” says Currie. “Aboriginal culture was also protecting urban Aboriginal peoples through additional mechanisms that remain unknown.”

Determining what these additional mechanisms are in collaboration and partnership with urban Aboriginal communities in Alberta will be a key focus of Currie’s future research. “To improve urban Aboriginal health, we need to start asking different questions and to start looking for different answers that are grounded in the knowledge of the community itself.” Currie says.

When asked what it meant to practice Aboriginal culture in a city, those in the study described participating in Aboriginal ceremonies and cultural events; valuing spirituality and family; and respecting oneself, others, and the earth. As stated by one study participant: When one returns to the Red Road one has a community, one has an identity, one feels the Creator working in their life - spirit heals.

The Social Science & Medicine journal publication entitled: Illicit and prescription drug problems among urban Aboriginal adults in Canada: The role of traditional culture in protection and resilience can be found at: http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953613002013
Other Comments for Media:

- Adults who do not complete high school are a high risk group for drug problems in any population.

- Almost half of Aboriginal adults in this study did not complete high school. Thus, we would expect high levels of drug problems in this group, and that was the case - but only for urban Aboriginals who did not participate in their culture.

- Urban Aboriginals who were without a high school diploma but highly involved in their culture appeared to be protected - very few had drug problems.

- These findings encourage the growth of programs that support Aboriginals who strive to maintain their cultural traditions while living in cities.