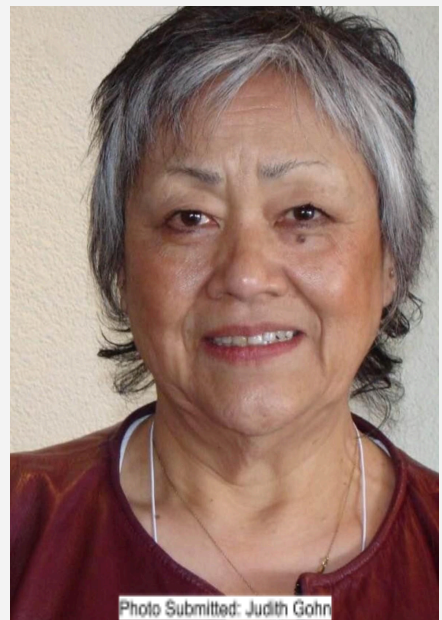


2024

Indigenous Nurses Day

The importance of culture in care: Judith Gohn

Written By: Eagle Andersen



On April 10th, 2024 we recognize all Indigenous Nurses who have accomplished significant feats in their field. With decades of experience in health directory roles, Gohn helped solidify the standard for Indigenous healthcare.

Judith Gohn is an innovator who helped establish Cowichan First Nation as a leader in Indigenous healthcare with innovative initiatives and a unique focus on culture during her time in community health.

Growing up, Gohn recalled her grandmother suffering from diabetes. As a curious young girl, she wanted to understand the condition and why her grandma was only allowed to drink diet Coca-Cola — though she always requested the full sugar version. This curiosity spurred her to pursue nursing later in life.

Gohn was born in Seattle, Washington, but later moved to Torrance, California to pursue nursing in various hospitals. There, she found a home as an RN in a surgical unit, between 1987 and 1992. Being a member of the Cowichan Tribe, she was often assigned to treat patients from the Navajo Nation.

“I’m Canadian First Nations, and they were American First Nations, but we’re pretty similar in that we have our culture, and we understand how important that is,” Gohn said.

Community Health in Cowichan First Nation

This emphasis on cultural consideration became core to Gohn. In 1992, she earned an opportunity to come home to Cowichan First Nation as a Community Health Nurse.

“I didn’t know anything about my own culture because I wasn’t raised on reserve,” Gohn said on her initial reaction to the move. “Being away from my culture, it was really important for me to understand [it] and it was like a whole new learning process for me.”

Through interacting with elders and community members, Gohn was able to understand Cowichan cultural teachings and values. Using wisdom passed down from elders, she helped develop written records of Cowichan teachings to inform care.

“We developed [the Cowichan teachings] with the elders, and that became reference for our service delivery,” Gohn said. “Each one of the staff members would have a copy and there were [posters] on the walls and I shared it with other First Nations. I said ‘Look at your own teachings in your community and then make sure that when you deliver your services that it fits.’”

Gohn became the Associate Health Director in 1995, and three years later was named Health Director at the Ts’ewulhtun Health Centre. Distributing the Cowichan teachings was just one of many undertakings during this period to strengthen the community’s health system.

The treatments administered by Gohn and her staff began to evolve as well. They took care to understand and inform patients of how traditional medicine would interact with other medications.

“[I was proud of] our ceremony and our traditional meds in our work,” Gohn said. “Our community members would use traditional medicine, we had to know what it was they were using.”

In addition to administering treatment, Gohn also improved how information was stored. Working with software developers, they created Mustimuhw Information Solutions to digitize medical records to help with confidentiality.

“That system now is used across Canada in lot of First Nations. It’s also used internationally, around the world. We received an award in Washington, D.C. for it,” Gohn said.

Another major accomplishment was her role in the British Columbia Tripartite Agreement. This was a crucial First Nations health governance policy that helped evolve Indigenous medical care in the province.

“We need more Indigenous nurses”

While she was undertaking these initiatives, Gohn always made sure that her “most valuable asset”, her staff members, were able to attend conferences and undergo extra training to ensure competence.

She is a strong advocate for encouraging Indigenous youth to get involved in healthcare, as she said it is important to have patients’ cultural backgrounds reflected by those treating them.

“We need more Indigenous nurses. Before I retired, and I was the Health Director, that was [a top priority],” Gohn said. “[Indigenous youth] need to see their own people in those [healthcare] positions to know that they can do it too.”

She said that “education is key to improving the social determinants of health” and youth should be encouraged to pursue these paths through bursaries and other measures to improve Indigenous healthcare.

Always focused on these broad community-building initiatives, Gohn’s communication was crucial to her success.

“I think it’s very important to keep Chief and Council updated on health. Every time you get funding, Chief and Council have to know what it’s for,” Gohn said.

As Health Director, she would meet monthly with the Chief and Council so they could understand what she was advocating for. This along with communicating with community members, was Gohn’s common practice and allowed her to lead and spearhead different programs.

Oftentimes this was done during luncheons or community events to encourage high attendance.

“We’d put on a big dinner because our elders would ‘Words go down better with food.’ So whenever we were going to talk to our community, we made sure there was food available, and it was cultural food too,” Gohn said.

Although she retired in 2015, Gohn feels accomplished that she “never was limited by the colonial system and structure” and she took pride in providing care that was “centered on patient’s voices and needs.”

Whether it was improving existing healthcare structures by supporting staff or creating entirely new systems like with Mustimuhw, Gohn was constantly innovating. Her accolades are numerous, but as the Cowichan teachings outline, family is what she takes the most pride in.

Her son is an RCMP Corporal in Prince George, and her daughter followed in her footsteps by working in healthcare — Gohn even has a teenage granddaughter who plans on being a nurse.

By combining culture with her local healthcare systems, Gohn’s impact has been immense. With her family carrying on the tradition, these impacts will continue to be felt.

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