



Traditional Healing

in the midst of science and bureaucracy

Story by Jack Tynan
Photography by Cody Storm Cooper

Leaning over a small bowl, Ken Tabobondong gently waved drifting sage smoke over his face and torso, rubbing the scent onto his shirt and face.

Picking up the bowl and an eagle feather, he then walked along the walls of the round room, person to person. Hospital administrators and First Nation residents – together in quiet meditation – reached out and pulled the white smoke in towards them, in a room which stands testament to the patience, perseverance and miles of red tape it takes to combine tradition and culture with science and bureaucracy.

The First Nation Healing Centre, buried on the ground floor of the new state-of-the-art West Parry Sound Health Centre (WP-SHC), is the first of its kind in Ontario and the proud reflection of the hard work put in by many at the hospital and in the area's First Nations communities.

Round with a sloped ceiling, decorated with dream catchers, native art and its own entrance facing, significantly, towards the west, the room provides an example of what a determined community can do – an example that has caught the interest of many hoping to build new hospitals across Ontario.

Although built on the foundations and within the walls of the new hospital, the room has its own fire alarm system, ventilation and soundproof walls to allow smudgings, tobacco burning, drumming and other traditional healing ceremonies once frowned upon in an institution of quiet hallways and sterilized surfaces.

"It's the modern technology embedded on the other side of those ceiling tiles that makes cultural tradition possible," said WP-SHC spokesperson Jim Hanna during a recent tour of the room. "It's these new things that are keeping old traditions alive, and, of course, the people who are supporting those traditions. It's something a patient could not do in any other hospital area, or any other hospital in Ontario. If they are critically ill, their whole bed could be wheeled down here and they could light some sweet grass, and do some drumming, which obviously would be very inappropriate in another hospital area."

The room provides relief for the large segment of the area's population who found they didn't fit in when it came to standardized hospital settings – setting off alarms and sprinkler systems while mourning the death or illness of a loved one.

Round to represent "the circle of life, our planet Mother Earth", the room also has four squares of colour in the centre of the floor, red, yellow, black and white, representing the four directions and the planet's four people, explained Wes Whetung, traditional coordinator/educator at the Shawanaga First Nation healing centre north of Parry Sound. Yellow, on the east side, also represents the beginning of life. Black, on the west, represents the end of life.

"I have members who were in the hospital and they wanted to come and see the room," said Moose Deer First Nation member Pauline Hacker. "When they banned smoking, you couldn't even do smudgings in the rooms. Now, at least, they have a place."

Ken Tabobondong's ceremony earlier this month could be considered a trial run as a committee of hospital and First Nation representatives met to prepare for the room's grand opening.

"We have in our culture a ceremony we call a smudging, with various plants, medicines," Mr. Whetung said. "We burn them and the smoke leads to healing. You can see right there you couldn't do that in a standard hospital. We're able to hold those ceremonies in the room without setting off alarms."

Before the WPSHC was built, First Nation families had to plan ahead and negotiate with staff at the old St. Joseph's Hospital – having fire alarms turned off and patients moved – in order to hold traditional ceremonies.

"It's a whole effort to coordinate something like this that takes everybody, maintenance, everyone in the hospital. It's discouraging actually," Mr. Whetung said. "If you have a relative who's sick in the hospital, if it's a prolonged illness, a terminal illness, maybe an accident on a long stretch of highway, that's tragic enough. If you want to depend on your culture, your heritage, it's a relief to do that right on site."

Ann Pamajewon, executive director of the Shawanaga Healing Centre, used the room in December after her mother passed away.

"We all gathered together in her (hospital) room, but then



Detail from painting by Ken Syrette