

Indigenous Myths & Misconceptions



Misconception: All Indigenous people get free health care

In Canada, provinces and territories deliver health care services, guided by the Canada Health Act. Health care services include insured hospital care and primary health care, such as physicians and other health professional services. Like any other resident, First Nations people and Inuit access these insured services through provincial and territorial governments.

“However, there are a number of health-related goods and services that are not insured by provinces and territories or other private insurance plans. To support First Nations people and Inuit in reaching an overall health status comparable with other Canadians, Health Canada's Non-Insured Health Benefits Program provides coverage for a limited range of these goods and services when they are not insured elsewhere.”¹

Health Canada also provides these services to First Nations because medicine and medical care are part of the treaties negotiated with First Nations. Although Treaty 6 is the only treaty with a written clause for medicine (‘That a medicine chest shall be kept at the house of each Indian Agent for the use and benefit of the Indians’²) the government negotiators consistently promised and provided medicine and medical care. It is also important to note that the government negotiators did not simply offer these services, but rather, First Nations sought medicine and medical care and were assured “that the Government would always be ready to avail itself of any opportunity of affording medical service.”³ As well, First Nations remember the words that Lt. Gov. Alexander Morris spoke when negotiating Treaty 6 “What I trust and hope we will do is not for to-day or tomorrow only; what I will promise, and what I believe and hope you will take, is to last as long as that sun shines and yonder river flows.”⁴ So, treaty terms have been recast in modern terms, with the medicine chest clause being regarded as providing the full benefits of Canadian health care.

Today’s Non-Insured Health Benefits Program is Health Canada's national health benefit program that provides coverage for benefit claims for a specified range of drugs, dental care, vision care, medical supplies and equipment, short-term crisis intervention mental health counselling and medical transportation for eligible First Nations people and Inuit.⁵

An eligible recipient for the Non-Insured Health Benefits Program must be identified as a resident of Canada and one of the following:

- A registered Indian according to the *Indian Act*;
- An Inuk recognized by one of the Inuit Land Claim organizations; or
- An infant less than one year of age, whose parent is an eligible recipient.
-

When recipients are eligible for benefits under a private health care plan, or public health or social program, claims must be submitted to these plans and programs first before submitting them to the Non-Insured Health Benefits Program.⁶

Non-status First Nation and Métis people do not receive any health care benefits from the federal government.