

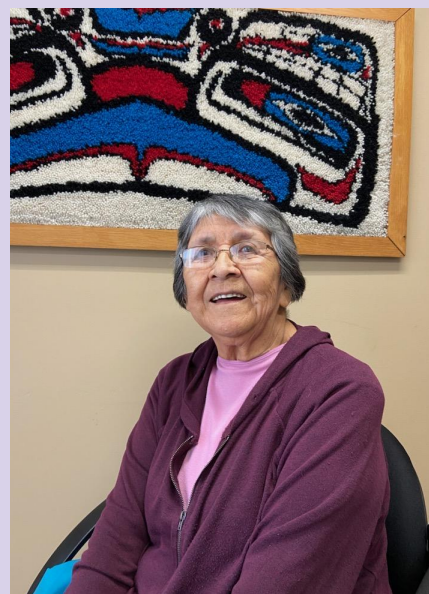
2023

Indigenous Nurses Day

The Value of Listening to and Respecting Patients

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With a career and lifetime devoted to nursing, Helen Dick has gained an array of knowledge and wisdom that she has applied to treating her patients.



Nuu-chah-nulth Elder advisor, Helen Dick

As an Elder advisor on the Nuu-chah-nulth nursing team, Helen Dick provides a wealth of knowledge. She has a lifetime of experience and wisdom that she has gained through many years spent as both a registered nurse (RN) and volunteer at West Coast General Hospital in Port Alberni, BC.

Born and raised in the Tseshaht First Nation located in Vancouver Island's Alberni Valley, Dick was inspired early in her life to pursue a career in healthcare, by various people, including her mother.

"When I was still a child, my father got sick, Dick recalled. "He did not want to be in a hospital, and so my mom took care of him twenty-four seven, and I used to watch her and I used to help her when she needed it."

Helping her mother care for her father was a formative experience for Dick and was one of the earliest memories where she helped treat someone. Watching her mother's selflessness really stuck with her.

"That was really amazing to me because not only as a wife, but as a mother looking after all those children, she made the time to look after our Dad, to make him comfortable because he was in his last stages of what we found out later was cancer, and he wanted to be at home with his wife and his children."

Seeing her mother, along with the doctor treat her father was the first time that healthcare as a potential life path crossed her mind.

It was later on, while attending a career day at school that this path seemed like a realistic option. Dick was conflicted between joining the air force and pursuing nursing but she explained that her mother helped her decide.

"My mom said no to the Air Force. So I said oh, I'll go for nursing. So I went to the nursing career and they had a nurse come in and tell the students about nursing. And I learned a lot from that. So that's what I decided," Dick recalled.

"My mom was my biggest fan. She was my biggest supporter in everything I did," Dick explained. "She said to remember who I am, and where I came from. I talked to her a lot in our language which helped me be just who I am and retain my culture"

Overcoming obstacles

Pursuing this new career wasn't without its challenges. Dick had been diagnosed with dyslexia early in her life which meant that she would have to put in a lot more work than some of her peers in order to be successful in her studies.

"That was always a challenge. But I learned from this one teacher that what I needed to do was to read, Well, that was difficult. When you're dyslexic, you see things differently, and I never was a very good reader in the early days, but it took a lot of practice and determination."

Determination is something that Dick has carried with her throughout life and her career. This was especially true while dealing with the racism that she experienced in the industry.

"Back then there was a lot of racism. Everybody knows that no matter what you were doing, there was going to be racism, and I found out a lot when I was a student," Dick recalled.

"They always gave you the menial things to do — clean the bedpan and the urinal, wash their face. To me, that was just like being a janitor to someone who was sick. That's how I defined it because they didn't feel we were smart enough."

Always determined, Dick remained steadfast in her goals, and with some encouragement from colleagues at the time, she gained her confidence.

"You were just given these menial jobs. But I said no, I'm here to be a nurse, and I'm going to be a nurse."

Treating patients with dignity

Although Dick went on to have a long and successful career in nursing, she speaks about treating patients very modestly.

“You can have ten titles behind you and that's no good to you if you don't treat people with respect and acknowledgment and dignity,” she said.

Dick has treated people from all walks of life, and she stresses the importance of treating them all with the best care possible.

“Every patient is different. Different nationality, different culture, different language, and I learned from them, and I came to understand and respect who they were, [and] where they came from,” Dick said.

More than respecting her patients' backgrounds, Dick feels that communicating with patients is crucial to providing the best care possible. Throughout her career, she felt that in order for patients to have dignity, those who were treating them had to give them respect. She stressed the importance of actually listening and interacting with her patients.

“You need to listen to what they have to say. How they're feeling, and why they're feeling, and just get a good grasp of what this person is about. Why are they sick? Why are they in this condition? Why do they have addictions?”

Dick's experiences in nursing and in life are numerous and she has certainly made her mark in Indigenous healthcare. However, the wisdom that she offers to aspiring and current healthcare workers may be some of her most important.

“You may be the only person that that patient talks to today and they might die within an hour. So we need to give them respect and dignity and acknowledgment and support, whether it's 12 minutes, half an hour, or an hour,” Dick said.

She puts it plainly:

“That might be the last time that you ever talk to them and they're gone... That's to me, the priority.”

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