

The Honourable Minister Dr. Eric Hoskins engaged in serious discussions with community members Ken and Sonya Sault whose daughter Makayla Rain Sault experienced difficulties within the medical institution before her tragic passing. Photo by Dave Laforce

Harmonizing health care discussed at two-day conference



The two-day Moving Forward Together conference on harmonizing Indigenous wellness in medicine and health practices was described by some as a watershed moment in breaking down the walls between modern mainstream medicine and Indigenous medicines and practices. After speeches and testimonials of personal experiences of Six Nations community members, the gathering broke into focus groups to discuss exactly what a harmonized system would look like. PHOTO BY JIM WINDLE.

By Jim Windle

OHSWEKEN – A precedent was set about a year ago in a Brantford courtroom by Justice Gethin Edward who ruled that an 11-year-old Onkwehon:we girl could not be forced to undergo chemotherapy, but could pursue alternative means including traditional medicines.

That decision caused ripples throughout the medical profession, which has opened the door to a new way of respecting both western and traditional medicines on equal grounds. The first formal gathering of health care professionals, traditional practitioners and the Ontario Government was described by some as a watershed moment in medicine and Canada's health care system.

Among those who attended the two-day meeting of the minds at the Six Nations Community Hall were Chiefs of Ontario Regional Chief Isadore Day, Minister of Aboriginal Affairs David Zimmer, President of McMaster Children's Hospital Peter Fitzgerald, Elected Chief Ava Hill, President and CEO of Hamilton Health Scienc-

es Robert MacIsaac, the Honourable Justice Gethin Edward, and Minister of Health and Long Term Care Dr. Eric Hoskins.

Dozens of health care workers, doctors and traditional healers together took up a good portion of the main auditorium of the Six Nations Community Hall on November 27th and 28th. The importance of this meeting was captured by Regional Chief Isadore Day. "This is a very important meeting for a number of people," Day told the *Two Row Times*.

"Commitments are being made by governments to finally listen to First Nations both provincially and federally. What we need to do is to make sure that our

indigenous value systems and indigenous health care systems become part of the solution. We definitely want to use this opportunity effectively and include our position, our rights and jurisdiction on health and we want to make sure that becomes part of the dialogue. That's why this meeting is so important. It brings people together to make sure the leaders get that message." Day commended Six Nations and the Mississaugas of the New Credit for taking the lead, saying that the problems faced by families of two Six Nations girls who opted for traditional and alternative medicines should never be allowed to happen again.

"We need to be coordinated and work to-

gether," said Day "There is both mainstream and traditional world views in healthcare systems and it shouldn't always be one or the other. It could be a combination of both and it makes sense to all of us to start combining these efforts and really give recognition to indigenous health care systems in the mainstream today.

Chief Ava Hill also held out hope that things would change when it comes to recognizing traditional medicine as an alternative to the mainstream medical

profession.

"I think these meetings are very important," she said. "The importance of this has been expressed by the people we have had here speaking and making announcements. We've got the Minister of Health here, President of Hamilton Health Science, Regional Chief Isadore Day, and I think everyone knows the importance of what we are doing here."

She was also pleased and encouraged at the number of frontline mainstream healthcare work-



Justice Gethin Edward.
PHOTO BY JIM WINDLE



Chiefs of Ontario Regional Chief, Isadore Day.
PHOTO BY JIM WINDLE

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ers and indigenous healers in the same room talking about how to incorporate traditional medicines and traditional Onkwehonwe healing practices.

"It's something that should have been done a long time ago," Hill said. "I am really glad that mainstream is becoming aware of traditional medicine and what it can do. It's about harmonizing both, as well as other alternative medi-

cines. That whole attitude of 'we know best' doesn't cut it anymore."

Although ravaged by much of the mainstream media for his precedent setting decision at the time, Justice Gethin Edward was very pleased that it may have initiated the conversation.

"It's been an incredible two days," Edward said of the gathering. "Day one was a lot of baring of souls, with people saying this was my experience and wasn't a good experience. That needed to be said because you can't just bury a bad history, it's got to be brought forward and that bad history was brought forward yesterday." Justice Edward gave a summary of his decision in an 11-year-old Onkwehon:we girl's case that was released just about a year ago.

"I had determined that this wasn't a right or proper application that this family believes strongly in traditional medicine and this wasn't sort of a last minute epiphany," he said.

"It was a decision that had been made by a committed family.

"As a result, the constitution afforded them the protection of their child and it was not, in my view, a child that needed protection.

"The first day of the conference was dedicated

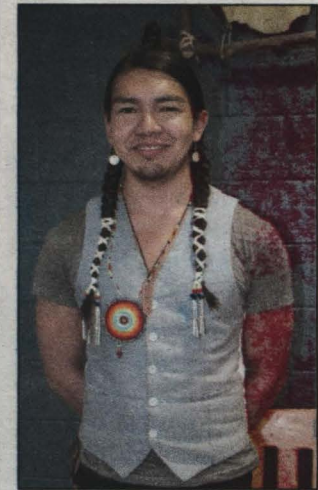
to what's wrong with the system, but the second was more about moving forward and finding how corrections can be made.

"To me, that is a watershed moment," said Edward. "With that, how do we move forward in a productive way to recognize that we don't need to

choose one over the other? We can have the benefit of choosing the best [that] both have to offer. That's an incredibly powerful card to have in your deck. If my child, God forbid, should get unwell, that child can be treated by either, or both.

"Traditional medicine

is available to those who committed to the process, not just taking a certain herb, but not committed to the spiritual side of it," he said "That's an important thing. If you chose traditional medicine you must be committed to that."



Dr. James Makokis who is trained in Western and traditional medicines travelled from Edmonton to attend the event.
PHOTO BY DAVE LAFORCE