



16 June 2011

13 national organizations endorse new policy statement affirming protection and promotion of Aboriginal sexual and reproductive health rights

OTTAWA (Ontario) – A new joint policy statement affirming the sexual and reproductive health rights of First Nations, Inuit and Métis women and youth has been produced through the work of five national organizations, as well as being endorsed by an additional eight. This statement, “Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights, Realities and Access to Services for First Nations, Inuit and Métis People in Canada,” was published in the June issue of the *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology Canada*.

“In Canada, Aboriginal women experience a disproportionately high rate of adverse health outcomes, such as STIs, complications in pregnancy and delivery, teenage pregnancies, and sexual violence,” says Dr. Don Wilson, co-chair of the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada’s (SOGC) Aboriginal Health Initiative Committee, which coordinated the production of this important statement. “To address this, we need to reduce inequities in the availability and accessibility of sexual and reproductive services. Part of this means delivering care that is culturally safe; this is crucial to optimal health and well-being for any population.”

Providing culturally-safe care in this context involves adapting practices and programs to suit the particular needs of Aboriginal women, including respect for their unique needs, interests, health beliefs and behaviours.

The five partners involved in the production of this statement are the SOGC, the Assembly of First Nations, the Canadian Federation for Sexual Health, Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada and the Native Youth Sexual Health Network. Additional organizations which have endorsed the statement are the Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada, the Canadian Association of Perinatal and Women’s Health Nurses, the Canadian Association of Midwives, the National Aboriginal Council of Midwives, the College of Family Physicians of Canada, the Canadian Medical Association, the Society of Rural Physicians of Canada, and the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada.

“This is an important step in raising awareness among health-care professionals, many of whom work with Aboriginal women and youth, about sexual and reproductive health rights and realities,” says Dr. André Lalonde, executive vice-president of the SOGC. “It also provides a common starting point for organizations to move forward in the development of accessible, culturally-relevant public health materials and youth-driven, community-based projects.”

Recommendations outlined in this statement include the need for health-care providers, organizations, and political and community leaders across Canada to advocate awareness of sexual and reproductive health rights; advise the Government of Canada to act on and implement the recommendations of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples; develop cultural competence among health-care providers; support the development of a federal-provincial-territorial Aboriginal birthing strategy, promote awareness and understanding of Non-Insured Health Benefits (NIHB) for First Nations and Inuit among health-care providers; and promote changes to NIHB policies to increase access to emergency and alternative contraceptives, counselling on sexual and mental health, and midwifery; and to encourage a return of traditional birthing to communities.

The statement was published in advance of National Aboriginal Day on June 21, when the SOGC will host an International Indigenous Women’s Health Symposium at its Annual Clinical Meeting in Vancouver, attended by nearly 700 health-care professionals. As part of this event, the SOGC will also be launching a new website with resources for the promotion of Aboriginal sexual health.

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About the SOGC

The SOGC is one of Canada's oldest national specialty organizations. Established in 1944, the Society's mission is to promote excellence in the practice of obstetrics and gynaecology and to advance the health of women through leadership, advocacy, collaboration, outreach and education. The SOGC represents obstetricians/ gynaecologists, family physicians, nurses, midwives and allied health professionals working in the field of sexual reproductive health. For more information, visit www.sogc.org.