

**Accreditation in Canadian First Nations and Inuit communities: A community-based approach responding to the unique needs of Indigenous communities**

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**Objective:**

A holistic framework was developed in response to the need for an accreditation system that is community-based, community-paced and responsive to the unique needs of Canada's Aboriginal communities.

**Methods:**

The Canadian Council on Health Services Accreditation (CCHSA) and Health Canada's First Nations and Inuit Health Branch (FNIHB) have been working with First Nations and Inuit (FNI) organizations since 1999 in the development of a culturally relevant accreditation system. Elements of this innovative nationally-recognized system offered by CCHSA include: Aboriginal community validation of the standards and processes to assess cultural relevance; training of Aboriginal surveyors; and specifically designed tools and education sessions.

FNIHB and CCHSA initiated a pilot project involving five First Nation health services programs that tested the accreditation program and process developed by CCHSA. To evaluate the accreditation process in these pilot communities, a qualitative study was conducted to capture the perceptions and opinions of those involved in the accreditation process. In 2004, a qualitative research study entitled The Community Health Centre Accreditation Process: A Qualitative Evaluation was conducted by Whiteduck Consulting. This study was comprised of on site and telephone interviews and focus groups with representatives from the community-based programs and FNIHB regional staff members. Seventy-three (73) respondents participated in this evaluation. Dialogue reporting was used, collective community comments were paraphrased and aggregated findings were analyzed for common themes.

**Results:**

The respondents in this study enthusiastically endorsed the CCHSA accreditation program and process and identified a number of benefits such as a renewed focus on continuous quality improvement, enhanced accountability and communication, improved integration with provincial health services, a strengthened foundation for capacity building as well as heightened credibility in the community. Some of the challenges identified by the respondents revolve around financial and human resources, the need for better education and preparation regarding the accreditation process as well as the need for support from local and regional government offices.

The study also provides recommendations on how to continue building the accreditation system for First Nations and Inuit organizations in response to the communities' needs. Some activities and strategies that have emerged from this evaluation are for example, the development and delivery of unique education sessions specific to the First Nations and Inuit communities, better integration with provincial healthcare services, further development of culturally validated rigorous standards, a national forum bringing together representatives of all First Nations and Inuit organizations engaged in accreditation to exchange best practises and presentations of information/awareness sessions to government offices that interface with the First Nations and Inuit health service organizations. These results have allowed CCHSA and FNIHB to continue to collaborate in supporting FNI organizations undergoing the accreditation journey.

**Conclusions:**

This study supports the premise that an holistic, community-based and culturally relevant accreditation system is both possible and beneficial for First Nations and Inuit health care services. The study results, including the recommendations and suggestions, have guided both CCHSA and FNIHB in our collaborative work with First Nations and Inuit organizations to build on our foundation and enhance the present accreditation program and process.