SIOUX LOOKOUT
Meno Ya Win
HEALTH CENTRE

Cross-Cultural Client Safety

A Case Study: The Care & Handling of Fetal Remains

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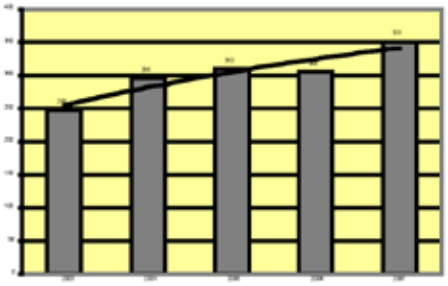
Background

Cultural competency and safety is an emerging area of interest. Anishnabe practices related to birth are an important part of our understanding and knowledge that underpin cultural competency at SLMHC.

New Arrival,
Lloyd Kakepetum, 2007

A Very Busy Obstetrical Practice



SLMHC has a very active and growing obstetrics practice. We now average a birth per day.

Unfortunately, almost 100 miscarriages and stillbirths also occur annually.

Tragedy Strikes!

In April 2004, three tragic incidents involving miscarriages happened within 5 days. Usual processes were not followed and “lab specimens” were returned directly to mothers in 3 of our communities without notice or appropriate handling. Burial and ceremonial handling of fetal remains is a common practice in many of our First Nations communities. These lab specimens did not have the appearance of a baby in any way, leaving the families to believe that their babies’ remains had been destroyed and substituted. The shock, anger and pain experienced by the mothers, families and tight-knit communities coupled with an initial denial of any problem by the regional laboratory service added to the anger and generated outrage on a national scale over the concern that it might happen again. Community leaders and Elders called for prompt action to ensure that “it will never happen again”.

All life is sacred. It is a gift from the Creator.
Josias Fiddler, Anishnabe Elder

The Search for a Better Way

A thorough external and internal review identified root causes of the problem, the potential on a wide scale for similar problems to occur because of the many differences in need among the 12 million people of Ontario because of their great diversity. The two hospitals involved were mandated to develop an approach that could be shared with all Ontario hospitals to prevent the recurrence this type of problem. An information packet has now been developed that will provide all Ontario hospitals and numerous other health service providers with a set of best practices and support materials. Contents of the information packet are identified below:

- Background on the loss of 3 babies, how the remains were mishandled and resulting impact on many people
- Outline of the processes followed to correct the problem and to develop best practices
- Definition of promising practices in the handling and care of fetal remains
- Sample policies, procedures, protocols, process flowcharts, checklists, etc. for nursing and lab staff
- Basic staff training and orientation materials
- Patient/family/community education and information materials
- An annotated bibliography

A Number of Promising Practices have been Identified

- Adopt a patient - or client-centered approach to all care transactions
- Build staff understanding and knowledge
- Change the language of care
- Ensure clearly defined course(s) of action with built-in triggers and rigorous communications
- Monitor performance consistently
- Build client/patient knowledge and understanding
- Provide choice and ensure consent
- Adopt prospective risk mitigation strategies (eg. FMEA)
- Use incident investigation techniques that identify root causes
- Support people who have experienced an adverse event by providing a healing pathway for them
- Share promising practices with others and learn from their experience in using them

Results to Date

- Several promising practices have been identified
- Model policies, procedures, flowcharts, checklists and other materials have been developed
- Patient and public communication materials have been developed
- Widespread dissemination of an information packet will support others in changing potentially adverse approaches
- Early identification and remedy of process breakdown has prevented any recurrences for the past 4 years despite almost 400 miscarriages and a dozen still births
- The circumstances that occurred and the search for a better way have resulted in a major cross-cultural safety initiative at SLMHC

Conclusion

SLMHC is moving beyond providing cultural awareness and training support for staff to a point where cultural competency and cross-cultural fluency are embedded in the psyche of the organization and reflected in the behavior of the staff.