

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action: How will occupational therapists respond?

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In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada published *Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future: Summary of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, which summarizes the findings of the commission in relation to the historic relationship between Indigenous peoples and the Government of Canada (TRC, 2015).¹ The TRC reviewed documents and obtained testimony from over 6,750 witnesses, who described the historical and ongoing legacy of colonization that included the loss of land and Indigenous government structures, languages, and spiritual practices. Residential schools were a key strategy of the Government of Canada's assimilation policy. For over 100 years, the Canadian government sanctioned and enforced the removal of Indigenous children, as young as 5 years old, from their home communities and families. Generations of children were "raised" in church-run residential schools; thus, communities and families were denied their human right to raise and care for their children. The last residential school closed in 1996. The intergenerational and multifaceted impacts of these colonial and assimilation policies on Indigenous peoples' health are manifested in serious health inequities that include high rates of trauma, mental illness, addictions, and physical health conditions (Reading & Wien, 2009). The relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in contemporary Canadian society are shaped by a colonial past and present (TRC, 2015). In this context, individual and systemic racism is recognized as a major contributing factor to Indigenous peoples' experiences of health and health care inequities (Allan & Smylie, 2015).

The TRC is an historic and landmark document that challenges all Canadians to learn about the history and aftermath of colonization and to engage in a process of reconciliation. For the TRC (2015),

reconciliation is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. In order for that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour. (pp. 6–7)

The TRC presented 94 "calls to action" that outline concrete steps that can be taken to begin the process of reconciliation. These recommendations span areas of governance, education, health, justice, child welfare, and others.

As occupational therapists of Euro-Canadian (Restall and Gerlach) and Indigenous (Valavaara and Phenix) ancestry, we have reflected on our individual and collective professional, moral, and ethical responsibilities to engage with, and respond to, the TRC's calls to action. We are concerned that our professional silence makes us complicit in upholding colonial structures and relationships in health and social care, academia, and society that perpetuate the marginalization and oppression of Indigenous peoples. Moreover, we perceive the TRC to be an opportunity for occupational therapy educators, researchers, and clinicians to translate their aspirations of client-centredness, human and occupational rights, and socially transformative practices into reality.

In the context of the ongoing marginalization and oppression of Indigenous peoples, we contend that occupational therapists, individually and collectively, need to expand their clinical, education, and research practices beyond a focus on individuals and their immediate environments (Gerlach, 2015). This opportunity for transformative and political activism requires that occupational therapists move out of a comfort zone of practice-as-usual, and the panacea of claiming “client-centredness,” to address the social and political systems and structures that create and perpetuate Indigenous peoples’ experiences of social injustices and health inequities. Addressing the calls to action requires occupational therapists to engage critically with the nature and underlying assumptions of occupational theories and concepts (Farias, Laliberte Rudman, & Magalhães, 2016) and with the politics of power, legislation, regulations, policies, and societal norms through which Indigenous peoples’ experiences of health inequities are structured. Occupational therapists bring their own values, beliefs, and experiences into their practices. Transforming practice requires critical awareness, not only of the complex social structures that perpetuate inequities, but of therapists’ roles within those structures. Addressing socially complex issues that include human and occupational rights (Hammell, 2015; Hocking et al., 2015) and health inequities (Gerlach, 2015) requires occupational therapists to engage in complex and political responses (Kirsh, 2015).

A critical starting point for this work is for occupational therapists and occupational therapy associations and educational programs in Canada to collaboratively create partnerships with local, provincial, and national Indigenous leaders and stakeholders to guide transformation of practices, curricula, and professional competencies. Understanding the centrality of “nothing about us, without us” is key to occupational therapy having a relevant and impactful role in contributing toward the rights of Indigenous peoples to have a quality of life and health outcomes equitable to other populations in Canada.

The TRC called for action and accountability for actions. As occupational therapists, how will we act and to whom will we be accountable? Through this editorial we aim to further a dialogue about the TRC and occupational therapists’ response to the calls to action. We also hope to inspire action individually and collectively (see Figure 1 for ways to become informed and involved). We implore each occupational therapist to ask, “What is my responsibility to address the current injustices and inequities experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada?” “How will I respond to the calls to action?” Collectively, we need to ask, “To whom is the occupational therapy profession in Canada accountable?” “How do occupational therapists acknowledge and enact their obligations to uphold the human and occupational rights of Indigenous peoples and support Indigenous self-determination?” “What can occupational therapy associations, educational programs, and communication forums, such as this journal, do to respond to the calls to action?” “What do we want historians to say that occupational therapy in Canada became in response to the TRC?”

Visit the TRC website: <http://www.trc.ca>
 Read the TRC report: <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=890>
 Read A Concise History of Canada's First Nations by Olive Patricia Dickason and William Newbigging.
 Read the OT Now column Aboriginal Peoples' Health and Occupational Therapy in Canada. The November/December 2016 issue features a paper authored by Kaarina Valavaara and Angie Phenix.
 Access the multimedia resources at the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health: www.nccah-ccsna.ca
 Become involved with the Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists' Occupational Therapy and Aboriginal Health Network: <http://www.caot.ca/default.asp?pageid=2035>
 Connect with occupational therapy organizations in your region to collectively address the calls to action.
 Connect with Indigenous groups or organizations in your community to find out how you can become an ally.

Figure 1. Ways for occupational therapists to become informed and involved.

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Note

1. The term Aboriginal includes First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples in Canada and is used extensively in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report. However, following the lead of contemporary Indigenous scholars and organizations, we have

chosen to use the term Indigenous as it “relates to many peoples’ beliefs that their cultures, histories, and responsibilities are tied to the lands [and denotes] a collective history among Indigenous peoples of the world regardless of borders” (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2014, p. 2).

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Les appels à l’action de la Commission de vérité et réconciliation : Comment les ergothérapeutes répondront-ils à ces recommandations?

En 2015, la Commission de vérité et réconciliation (CVR) du Canada publiait le document *Honorer la vérité, réconcilier pour l’avenir: Sommaire du rapport final de la Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada*. Ce document présente les conclusions de la Commission en ce qui concerne la relation historique entre les peuples autochtones et le Gouvernement du Canada (CVR, 2015).¹ La CVR a examiné différents documents et a recueilli les témoignages de plus de 6 750 témoins ayant décrit l’héritage historique et continu de la colonisation, soit la perte des terres, des structures gouvernementales, des langues et des pratiques spirituelles des Autochtones. Le système des pensionnats a été un élément central de la politique d’assimilation du Gouvernement du Canada. En effet, pendant plus de 100 ans, le gouvernement canadien a sanctionné et imposé le retrait des enfants autochtones, parfois dès l’âge de cinq ans, de leur communauté et famille. Ainsi, plusieurs générations d’enfants ont été ‘élevés’ dans des pensionnats dirigés par l’église; on a ainsi privé les communautés et familles autochtones du droit d’élever et de s’occuper de leurs enfants. Le dernier pensionnat autochtone a fermé ses portes en 1996. Les répercussions

intergénérationnelles et multidimensionnelles de ces politiques colonialistes et d’assimilation sur la santé des peuples autochtones se manifestent par d’importantes inégalités en matière de santé, notamment des pourcentages élevés de traumatismes, de maladies mentales, de toxicomanie et de problèmes de santé physiques (Reading et Wien, 2009).

Dans la société canadienne contemporaine, les relations entre les Autochtones et non-Autochtones sont façonnées par un passé et un présent colonialistes (CVR, 2015). Dans ce contexte, le racisme individuel et systémique est reconnu comme un important facteur contribuant aux inégalités dont les peuples autochtones sont victimes en matière de santé et de soins de santé (Allen et Smylie, 2015).

Le rapport de la CVR est un document-phare historique qui incite tous les Canadiens à découvrir l’histoire et les conséquences de la colonisation et à s’engager dans un processus de réconciliation. Pour la CVR (2015), la réconciliation « consiste à établir et à entretenir une relation de respect réciproque entre les peuples autochtones et non-autochtones dans ce pays. Pour y arriver, il faut prendre conscience du