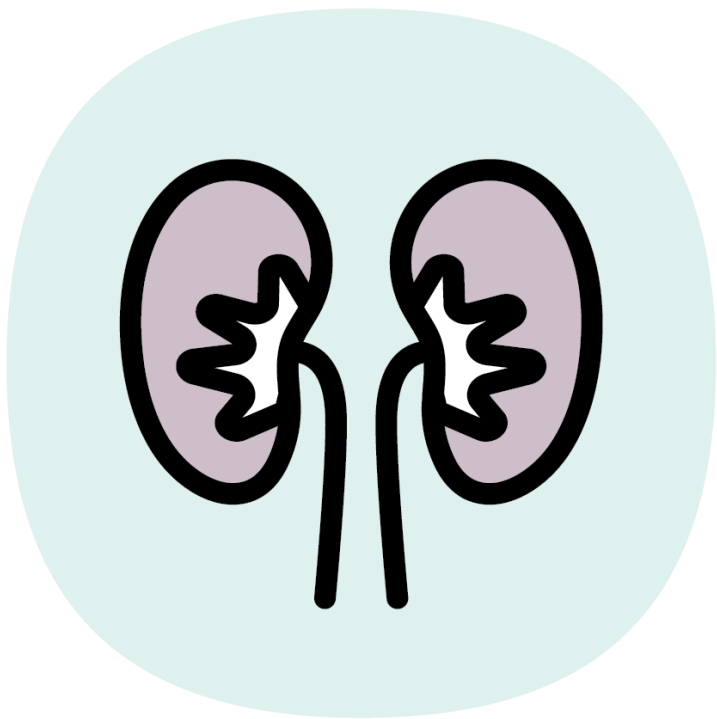




Indigenous Kidney Health Spotlight

January 2026

The Indigenous Kidney Health Spotlight strives to share perspectives, updates, and progress from the Ontario Health's Indigenous Kidney Health Team, while highlighting efforts made by Regional Renal Programs to strengthen renal care and support health equity for First Nations, Inuit, and Métis people across Ontario.

In this upcoming issue, we are proud to feature the Indigenous Diabetes Health Circle (IDHC) — an organization dedicated to improving health outcomes for Indigenous peoples through programs focused on diabetes education, prevention, and management. Serving First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities both on and off reserve across Ontario, the IDHC works to empower individuals and communities with culturally grounded approaches to wellness and chronic disease care.



Ontario Health
Ontario Renal Network



Message from Dr Scott Brimble, Provincial Medical Lead, Indigenous Kidney Health

As Provincial Medical Lead, I am deeply proud of the progress made over the past year through the collective efforts of the Ontario Renal Network and the Indigenous Kidney Health Team. This work has been anchored by the development of the Indigenous Kidney Health Plan, launching in spring 2026, and informed by meaningful engagement with First Nations, Inuit, Métis, and urban Indigenous partners as we move toward co-developing implementation plans with Indigenous partners and Regional Renal Programs. These strong partnerships are already translating into action on the ground, including the leadership shown by Regional Renal Programs in Thunder Bay and London, which hosted their first chronic kidney disease screening events towards the end of 2025. With seven active screening programs now operating across the province and four more in development, we are seeing meaningful progress towards earlier detection of kidney disease and its risk factors, and improved access to high quality care. This issue of the Indigenous Kidney Health Spotlight further reflects this momentum through our collaboration with the Indigenous Diabetes Health Circle, an Indigenous-led organization whose holistic, culturally grounded approach to kidney health and diabetes prevention closely aligns with our shared vision for health equity. I am energized by the strength of these partnerships and excited to see the meaningful work and impact that will continue to unfold in the year ahead.



Indigenous Diabetes Health Circle (IDHC): Advancing Wholistic Wellness and Community Strength

In this issue of *The Indigenous Kidney Health Spotlight*, we are in conversation with Autumn Watson (Director of Programs) and Samantha Lascelles (Client Services Manager) from the Indigenous Diabetes Health Circle (IDHC), an Indigenous-led organization that has been at the forefront of promoting health equity across Ontario for over 25 years. Through their wholistic approach, the IDHC integrates Traditional Indigenous knowledge with evidence-based Western medical practices to improve health outcomes, with a particular focus on diabetes prevention and kidney health. The Ontario Renal Network (ORN) is fortunate and honoured to collaborate with the IDHC in advancing kidney health initiatives, especially in remote First Nations communities. Their work—ranging from mobile kidney-screening clinics to culturally informed health education—aligns closely with our shared commitment to improving access to care and supporting community-driven solutions. In this interview, Samantha and Autumn share their insights on the IDHC's impactful work and their vision for a future where Indigenous communities are free from chronic disease.

Ontario Renal Network (ORN): What is the Indigenous Diabetes Health Circle's (IDHC) mission, and how did it come to be?

IDHC:

Our Mission and Origins

The Indigenous Diabetes Health Circle (IDHC) is an Indigenous-led charitable organization committed to improving health outcomes for Indigenous communities across Ontario through culturally grounded, wholistic approaches. Established over 25 years ago, the IDHC was born from a vision of health equity and respect for Indigenous knowledge systems. Guided by Elders and rooted in Traditional teachings, the IDHC creates safe, sacred spaces where dignity, autonomy, and diversity are honored.

Our mission is to promote wholistic wellness models that integrate physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. We build on Traditional teachings and best practices to deliver programs, education, training and resources that strengthen relationships and community capacity. Our vision is clear: Indigenous peoples have the tools, knowledge, and ability to make healthy choices and live free of diabetes—now and for generations to come.

ORN: Why are organizations like the IDHC so important in providing culturally safe care?

IDHC:

Why Culturally Safe Care Matters

Unfortunately, for many First Nations people, visiting a mainstream health care facility does not always feel welcoming. Clients often describe walking through those doors with their defenses up, expecting to encounter discrimination, prejudice, or even outright racism—sometimes from support staff, and at times from the primary medical practitioner. Already in a vulnerable position, seeking help for sensitive health concerns, they also face the risk of being misunderstood or judged for their lifestyle choices and use of Traditional medicines.

In contrast, when you enter our main office, you are greeted by the comforting scent of sacred medicines from our wellness room, the aroma of good food from our kitchen, and the sound of laughter shared between staff and community. It feels like stepping into a relative's home—warm, familiar, and safe. In keeping with Traditional ways, you are offered the best seat and the best food, a gesture that says: you are welcome here, you are honoured, and you are respected.

Our hope is that every client feels loved, respected, and well cared for when they visit us. To us, culturally safe care means upholding sacred laws and honouring the trust our community members have placed in us.

ORN: What do you wish more people knew about the IDHC and the issues you're working to solve?

IDHC:

Wellness Journey

At the IDHC, we are committed to improving health outcomes for Indigenous communities through culturally grounded, community-led initiatives.

The IDHC's Foot Care Program began as a pilot project in 2007 with a goal to partner with communities to strengthen collaboration, build capacity and prioritize subsidizing preventative foot care to Indigenous people that are affected by, or are at risk of developing diabetes and its complications. In 2024, Ontario Health dedicated funding to the Lower Limb Preservation (LLP) Initiative with a focus on reducing diabetes-related lower leg amputations. Now in its second year, the IDHC's wholistic LLP model has successfully launched an integrated clinical pathway that combines Traditional healing practices with eye health and foot care screening. We are expanding this work to Northern Ontario, where amputation rates are highest, and building capacity within First Nations communities through education and resources.

Recognizing the interconnected nature of chronic conditions, we've broadened our screening to include Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD). In partnership with Ontario Health, Niagara Health, and De dwa da dehs nye>s Aboriginal Health Centre, we will launch our first CKD screening clinic at our home office in March 2026. These clinics will offer a welcoming environment enriched with Traditional teachings and medicines, ensuring care that respects cultural values.

The IDHC has embarked on a province-wide initiative to support frontline health care workers in delivering culturally safe, trauma and violence-informed care to Indigenous clients living with diabetes. The training will make connections between intergenerational trauma, lived experience and diabetes risk, while emphasizing the role of cultural knowledge and healing in improving outcomes.

On a national level, our Karihwásthá ("still useful") Public Policy Initiative is driving systemic change. For the past three years, we have convened Indigenous leaders, health professionals, policymakers, and community members throughout Canada to prioritize strategies for addressing the disproportionately high rates of diabetes among Indigenous populations. By integrating Traditional knowledge with modern approaches, we aim to influence national policy to ensure culturally appropriate, community-led interventions for prevention, early detection, and better management of chronic disease.

ORN: Is there an achievement of the IDHC's that you are most proud of?

IDHC:

25+ years of community driven impact

The greatest achievement of the IDHC is not a single milestone, but our unwavering, community-driven commitment to improving the health and wellness of Indigenous peoples across Ontario

for more than 25 years. Our work is rooted in the belief that sustainable change comes from honouring Indigenous knowledge and traditions while integrating Western medical practices—creating a balanced approach that supports long-term wellness.

Key accomplishments that reflect this commitment include:

- **Community Capacity Building:** The IDHC has partnered with over 100 organizations to empower communities to design and lead their own culturally grounded diabetes prevention and awareness initiatives. This ensures solutions are locally relevant and community-owned.
- **Wholistic Wellness Models:** We champion approaches that honour the interconnectedness of physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional wellbeing. By incorporating Traditional teachings and the healing connection to the land, we help individuals and families embrace wellness as a way of life.
- **Innovative Programs:** Our specialized programs, such as Eye Health and Foot Care, provide education, assessment, and treatment to prevent serious complications like amputations—an urgent concern for those living with diabetes.
- **Adaptability and Resilience:** During the COVID-19 pandemic, the IDHC quickly transitioned services online, ensuring continued support for communities facing isolation and reduced access to health care. This adaptability reflects our deep commitment to meeting people where they are.
- **IDHC's Training Centre:** A huge milestone was reached in May 2024 when the IDHC was successful in meeting the criteria for ISO 21008 certification in Management Systems for Educational Organizations. This certification adds value to the allotted training, allowing us to award Continuing Education Units to learners who complete the array of IDHC courses.
- **Integrating Knowledge and Research:** We prioritize culturally safe and community-driven evaluations, resources, and services by balancing Indigenous knowledge with research. This approach ensures that our work remains relevant, respectful, and effective.
- Ultimately, **our greatest success is the trust we have built within Indigenous communities.** That trust allows us to support individuals in making healthy choices and to help current and future generations live well—preventing diabetes and promoting wholistic wellness for years to come.

ORN: In the future, what role do you envision the IDHC to have within the kidney care space?

IDHC:

Strengthening Kidney Wellness in Indigenous Communities

In the future, the IDHC will serve as a leading catalyst for culturally grounded kidney health initiatives, expanding and strengthening partnerships that integrate traditional Indigenous healing practices with Western clinical care. This approach will drive improvements in kidney-disease screening, prevention, and early intervention for First Nations communities.

The Need:

First Nations communities—particularly those in remote or rural areas—continue to face significant barriers to timely kidney screening, culturally safe care, and preventative health services. Limited access to primary care, geographic isolation from specialized nephrology services, and systemic inequities contribute to higher rates of undiagnosed or late-stage kidney disease. There is an urgent need for accessible, community-driven, and culturally informed prevention strategies.

Our Approach:

Through collaborative partnerships with Elders, Knowledge Holders, community health organizations, and clinical providers, the IDHC will implement an integrated model of kidney-health promotion that respects Indigenous knowledge systems while leveraging evidence-based western medical practice.

Key initiatives will include:

- Building relationships and partnerships to support the implementation of mobile and on-site kidney-screening clinics in remote communities
- Culturally informed health education focused on prevention, early warning signs, nutrition, and land-based wellness practices
- Training for community health workers to support ongoing monitoring and prevention
- Knowledge-sharing frameworks that unite Traditional Healers and western practitioners to design community-specific approaches
- Data-informed follow-up pathways ensuring individuals identified at risk receive timely, culturally safe care

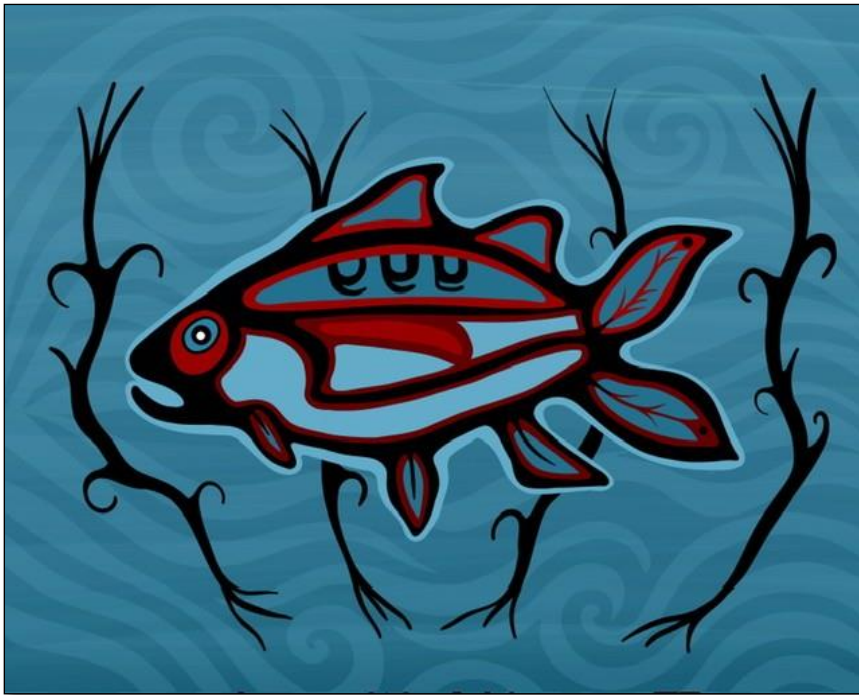
Expected Outcomes:

- Increased access to early kidney screening for remote and underserved First Nations communities
- Strengthened community capacity to deliver ongoing, locally led prevention initiatives
- Improved coordination between Traditional healing systems and western clinical services
- Earlier detection of kidney disease and reduced progression to late-stage illness
- Enhanced trust, cultural safety, and community engagement in kidney-health programs

By embedding prevention within both Indigenous and Western frameworks of care, the IDHC will support sustainable, community-owned solutions that advance kidney health equity for Indigenous peoples. This approach strengthens local capacity, reduces long-term health care burdens, and promotes wholistic wellness for individuals, families, and future generations.

The Strength-Based Impact

The IDHC's work is not just about managing diabetes—it is about restoring balance, honouring traditions, and building resilience. By embedding prevention and healing within Indigenous knowledge systems, we create sustainable solutions that strengthen individuals, families, and communities. Our vision is bold yet achievable: vibrant, healthy Indigenous communities living free of diabetes and chronic disease, supported by wholistic wellness for generations to come.



Fish and Kidney in Natural Environment

Ryan Woodruff, Artist

Ryan Woodruff, Anishinaabe Ojibwe artist, born and raised in the vibrant landscape of Niagara.

Trained initially in graphic design, Ryan has embarked on a transformative journey to reconnect with his roots through his take on Indigenous art. Inspired by a desire to honor and represent traditional indigenous art, Ryan has carved out a distinctive style that captivates with vibrant colors and a fluid, dynamic flow.

Creating on a digital canvas, powered by his iPad and computer, Ryan tries to tell the rich stories and traditions of his people.



Upcoming Indigenous Days of Significance

March 20	Elderbeary Day – https://fncaringsociety.com/elderbeary-day
March 22	World Water Day – https://www.worldwaterday.org/
April 7	World Health Day – https://www.who.int/campaigns/world-health-day
First Friday in May (May 1)	National Indigenous Diabetes Awareness Day - https://idhc.life/first-friday-in-may-is-national-indigenous-diabetes-awareness-day/
May 5	Red Dress Day/National Day of Awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and 2SLGBTQIA+ Peoples – https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/red-dress-day
May 9	Indigenous Nurses Day - https://rnao.ca/news/indigenous-nurses-day
May 10	Bear Witness Day - Jordan's Principle – https://fncaringsociety.com/bear-witness-day
May 12	Moose Hide Campaign Day - https://moosehidecampaign.ca/campaignday/
	UNESCO - International Decade of Indigenous Languages (2022-2032) This decade aims to draw global attention to the critical situation of many Indigenous languages and to mobilize relevant stakeholders for the preservation, revitalization, and promotion of these languages. https://www.unesco.org/en/decades/indigenous-languages



Cultural Safety Education

The Ontario Renal Network (ORN) remains committed to fostering culturally safe environments for Indigenous people accessing mainstream health care services. Cultural safety provides a framework for examining personal and systemic biases, addressing power imbalances, and acknowledging the social and historical contexts that influence the health and wellness of Indigenous communities.

By understanding the root causes of health inequities affecting Indigenous patients, health care providers can deliver care that is culturally aware, sensitive, and competent. This approach is guided by the principle of cultural humility, which emphasizes lifelong learning, self-reflection, and a continuous commitment to promoting the wellbeing of all patients.

Please see below for resources and cultural safety education opportunities:

Courses

[Ontario Health's Indigenous Relationship and Cultural Awareness Courses](#) (Free)

These 13 courses will provide you with knowledge about the history and culture of First Nations, Inuit, Métis and urban Indigenous peoples and communities. The four foundational modules include:

- First Nations, Inuit, and Métis Culture, Colonization and the Determinants of Health
- Indigenous History and Political Governance
- Cultural Competence in Health Care
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) and the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)

The courses are designed for self-paced learning. They are available to anyone, free of charge. For HSPs with additional budgets for cultural safety training, prioritize the following:

- [Indigenous Primary Health Care Council's Anishinaabe Mino'Ayaawin](#) – People in Good Health training (At cost)
- [San'Yas Anti-Racism Indigenous Cultural Safety Program](#) (At cost)

Resources

- [Staff Resource Manual: Indigenous Self-Identification](#) (Maamwesying OHT)
- [Making It Sacred: Food is Our Medicine](#) (IDHC)
- Canadian Journal of Public Health: [A scoping review of Indigenous community-based research practices, guidelines, and ethical standards](#)
- First Nations Health Managers Association (FNHMA): [Bridging Worlds, Creating Safety: An Environmental Scan, Competency Framework, and Strategic Vision for the Indigenous Health Navigator Profession](#)



Additional Recommendations

Books

- [Wisdom Engaged: Traditional Knowledge for Northern Community Well-being](#) by Leslie Main Johnson
- [Clearing the Plains: Disease, Politics of Starvation, and the Loss of Indigenous Life](#) by James Daschuk
- [Book of Hope: Healthcare and Survival in the North](#) by Agnes R. Pascal

Podcasts/Videos

- [Traditional Medicines And Healing in Today's World](#) (IDHC)
- [Storying Decolonized Indigenous Food Systems: Repatriation/Rematriation of Indigenous Lands](#) (IDHC)

If you have content recommendations for future spotlights, please contact: Mallika Patil, Senior Specialist, Indigenous Kidney Health (mallika.patil@ontariohealth.ca)

Need this information in an accessible format? 1-877-280-8538, TTY 1-800-855-0511, info@ontariohealth.ca.
Document disponible en français en contactant info@ontariohealth.ca