



MANITOBA INSTITUTE
FOR PATIENT SAFETY

Make It Personal: Interview Series

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An Interview with Margaret Lavallee

Margaret Lavallee is Traditional Ojibway Ikwe, Elder in Residence and Aboriginal Cultural Specialist at Ongomiizwin, The Indigenous Institute of Health and Healing in Rady College of Medicine, University of Manitoba. In her role as Elder, Margaret ensures cultural programming is incorporated into all levels of student support at the University of Manitoba in research and education. Previously, she worked at the Health Sciences Centre providing support to Indigenous patients.



Patient Safety Connected to Patient Comfort

“Patient safety for me is for the patient to have a feeling of comfort and welcome.” Margaret expressed that feeling safe is part of the patient’s desire to heal; be it in a clinic, or in a hospital, and to feel that comfort that they should be feeling while they are being hospitalized or seeing a physician, or seeing a therapist. “Just that comfort feeling that they are safe to be there. That is the most important for patient safety.”

Margaret shared the concern that in the hospital there can be a lot of fear, because there is a crisis that is happening when a patient is hospitalized. “Even if you are just there for a day or two, it is still a crisis for that person, so that comfort, and that warmth has to be demonstrated by healthcare professionals.”

Keeping the Care in Healthcare

I asked Margaret how clinicians can ensure patients have this feeling of comfort. “I will give you an example. When I worked at the hospital, I did a translation for a patient seeing an x-ray technician. The technician didn’t speak English very well, and the patient didn’t speak any English. So he spoke to the patient in his language as I was coming in. I could understand that by the way that he was speaking that he was very gentle and kind, even though he needed to get the procedure done in a certain amount of time. This made the patient very relaxed, and she was able to do what she needed to do by his gestures - how to take a deep breath, how to hold her breath- he physically demonstrated how to do that with kindness and nurturing. This is



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very rare. That has stayed in my mind for a very long time. Even with language barriers, you still can communicate with someone with kindness.”

Culturally Safe Care

“There are a number of cases that I can cite from the hospital when people did not feel safe, when people felt that they were being discriminated against, and they felt that they shouldn’t be there because they were Indigenous.” This feeling can come from various situations. There are misunderstandings, for example, when Hospital staff don’t know the significance of a patient’s eagle feather, and it would get thrown out. There can also be stereotyped labelling. “The people did not see that, but I saw that in their charts. I had to read their charts, in order to translate. Common labels are “stoic” or “poor historian”. With these stories, Margaret reminds us of the importance of consciously reflecting on our actions and language in order to provide culturally safe care.

Ongomiizwin - Clearing a path for generations to come

I asked Margaret how patients can keep themselves safe. “Ongomiizwin -that is the word that would be used by an elder, by a parent, from anyone whose loved one is coming into a hospital. You have to prepare yourself, be kind to yourself, so that whatever information you will be receiving from the healthcare system, that you embrace yourself in that situation. You need to prepare yourself for the diagnosis and prognosis -patients need to know what is happening. Sometimes it is not a good outcome.”

There are many translations of this word, it can be used for almost anything you are going to do. If you are going out hunting, if you are going out fishing on the lake, if you are going to the hospital, you use this word. It is for meant for you, to take care of yourself in a good way, to protect yourself, so that for the generations to come, they will benefit by your experience and how you deal with the current things that are happening. “It isn’t the ancient language, but it is something that you can say in any situation to tell someone to be well on their journey. To prepare themselves spiritually, mentally, and emotionally.”

Chi miigwetch to Elder Margaret for this beautiful teaching.

The Manitoba Institute for Patient Safety (MIPS) is an independent, not-for-profit corporation established in 2004 to promote and coordinate activities that improve patient safety and enhance quality healthcare in Manitoba.

Written by Cara Brown, MIPS Volunteer and Assistant Professor, Rady Faculty of Health Sciences, College of Rehabilitation Sciences