

25. That the federal government use its powers under the *Canada Health Act* to insist that all provinces and territories make access to therapeutic abortion available to all women.

4. Aboriginal People

While the health status of aboriginal people has improved considerably over the past 20 years, the status of health of both those living on and off reserves is still significantly below the Canadian average. Life expectancy at birth increased and infant mortality decreased for all Canadians, including aboriginal people, during this period but the gains in health status achieved by aboriginal people were still well behind those achieved by other Canadians. The life expectancy at birth of status Indians, for example, was 10 years less than that of the national population in 1981 and the projected figure for 2001 is below the 1981 figures for Canadians as a whole.⁹⁹ To some extent, these differences in health status are related to problems of accessibility to the health care system faced by aboriginal people.

Dr. Gillian Lynch of Health and Welfare Canada pointed out that the services required by aboriginal people are not, because of their history, culture and other unique characteristics, the same as those for Canadians as a whole.¹⁰⁰

Both Dr. Lynch and the Native Council advised the Committee of the role of traditional medicine and ancestral customs in health care for aboriginal people. In isolated communities, escorts and interpreters are provided so that patients can communicate with doctors and other health personnel. Many are of the view, however, that more participation by aboriginal people in the delivery of health services would greatly improve their access to quality care. In part, this would involve the creation of more career opportunities for aboriginal people in the health sector and the transfer of responsibility for health services in their communities to aboriginal people themselves. These areas have received attention over the past two decades and in some cases such control either already exists or planning towards it is ongoing.

The Indian and Inuit Health Careers Program of the Medical Services Branch of Health and Welfare Canada promotes participation of aboriginal people in health careers. While this program has had some success, it applies only to those living on reserves. Speaking generally of the supply of native health professionals, the Native Council of Canada said:

⁹⁹ Hagey et al., *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹⁰⁰ Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Medical Services Branch, Health and Welfare Canada, *Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence*, Issue No. 12.