

Providing Safe Diabetes Care with Indigenous Older Adults: Artists' Reflections

The three Indigenous artists whose work brings vibrancy and meaning to the infographic pages have each written companion reflections that share their creative journeys and the cultural significance woven into their artwork. These reflections offer deeper insight into the importance of the co-design process and the stories, symbolism, and teachings represented in the images.

First Nations Artist Reflection: A Journey of Relationship, Trust, and Indigenous Knowledge

Introduction: Why This Work Matters

Across Canada, Indigenous Peoples experience diabetes at higher rates, with earlier onset, greater severity, and more frequent complications (Halseth, 2019). These inequities are shaped by multiple risk factors including colonial systems, historical trauma, and barriers to culturally safe care as well as biological factors. For Indigenous older adults, these challenges are intensified by, age, social determinants of health, individual colonial traumas and systemic racism within health systems.

In Waterloo Wellington, Elders and Knowledge Keepers voiced the urgent need for better education and cultural safety in diabetes care. In response, the Waterloo Wellington Older Adult Council brought together a working group of Certified Diabetes Educators (CDEs), health professionals, Indigenous Elders, and Indigenous older adults living with diabetes to co-create an educational tool for primary care providers.

The outcome was an infographic that highlights the unique realities of Indigenous older adults living with diabetes and offers clear, culturally grounded guidance for providers. This companion document tells the story of how that infographic was created, a story rooted in relationship, respect, and Indigenous ways of knowing.

Entering the Work: A Personal Reflection

My name is Ryan MacTavish. I am Mohawk, Turtle Clan, from Six Nations of the Grand River. I joined this project as both an emerging artist and as someone personally connected to the realities of diabetes. My mother passed away from complications related to diabetes and rheumatoid arthritis, and I live today with prediabetes.

For me, this work was never just professional. It was personal, relational, and cultural. The chance to contribute my knowledge as an Indigenous person, my lived experience, and my skills as an artist felt like a way of honoring my family, my community, and those living with diabetes across the region.

The Working Group: Building Through Relationship

From the beginning, the working group emphasized that this project could not be developed in isolation from Indigenous voices. Indigenous older adults, Elders, and Knowledge Keepers shared their experiences with diabetes care, often naming stories of discrimination, lack of culturally appropriate care and a lack of recognition of traditional approaches.

These voices grounded the project. They reminded us that relationship is both value and method. Working relationally, building trust the group aimed to ensure that Indigenous perspectives shaped every step of the process.

Health professionals brought deep commitment to respectful collaboration, ensuring that Indigenous knowledge was honored alongside clinical expertise. We agreed that the process itself was just as important as the final product.

Inspiration and Design: A Journey from the Land

One of the most meaningful parts of this project was the inspiration-gathering stage. I went to the land. The gifts of Creation, the trees, medicines, and waters, became the foundation of the visual storytelling.

The Tree of Peace was chosen as a central image, representing interconnectedness, unity, and strength. The sacred medicines: tobacco, sweetgrass, cedar, and sage, were to remind us of Indigenous teachings of balance, healing, and respect. The Grand River, central to the Haudenosaunee territory where I live, was incorporated to symbolize water as sacred and life-giving. Each symbol carries meaning and intention.

I had the privilege of collaborating with Andreea McKague, a talented digital artist whose technical expertise elevated the project. Andreea translated these cultural teachings and design visions into a polished, professional visual document.

The Outcome: A Tool for Providers

This visually engaging, evidence-based, and culturally grounded resource highlights:

- The greater risks and earlier onset of diabetes among Indigenous Peoples.
- The root causes of health inequities, including intergenerational trauma and colonization.
- The importance of cultural confidence, trust-building, and humility in care.
- Practical steps for sensitive, safe, and empowering diabetes care.

Most importantly, it centers Indigenous voices. Quotes from local Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Indigenous older adults living with diabetes appear throughout the infographic, reminding providers that this work is about people, families, and communities, not just statistics.

Reflections: The Process as the Teaching

What this project taught me is that the process is the teaching. We could not have created an infographic of this depth and meaning without moving slowly, with respect, and with intention. For health professionals, the invitation is clear: diabetes care for Indigenous Peoples cannot be “one-size-fits-all.” It must be relational. It must be culturally safe. It must recognize trauma, history, and resilience. And it must be willing to learn from Indigenous knowledge and voices. As an Indigenous person, this work has been a way of bringing together my lived experience, my cultural teachings, and my artistry in service of community. I carry gratitude for Andreea, and all members of the working group who approached this project with humility, care, and openness.

Reference: Halseth, R (2019). *The prevalence of Type 2 diabetes among First Nations and considerations for prevention*. Prince George, BC: National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health.

Artwork: Ryan Mactavish, Mohawk, Six Nations of the Grand River & Andreea McKague

Artist: Ryan MacTavish, Mohawk, Six Nations of the Grand River

Inuit Artist Reflection

I really enjoyed doing this mini project, and I am really proud about this collaboration. I chose to make my images using pen art. This type of art is inspired from my late cousin Alooook Ipeellie's pen artwork. "Alooook Ipeellie was a talented illustrator and prolific writer whose practice celebrated Inuit cultural practices and drew attention to the negative impacts of colonialism. He presented a perspective on development in the Arctic that actively challenged notions of Inuit as untouched by modernity. Ipeellie worked to change the narrative about Inuit through his writing and illustration, putting cultural resilience and survival at the forefront in the face of forced settlement and assimilation ([Alooook Ipeellie | IAQ Profiles | Inuit Art Foundation](#))." This infographic similarly brings attention to the impacts of colonization on Inuit, in particular as it relates to diabetes.

Inuit have always had a unique relationship with food, one that's lasted for thousands of years. This relationship has even changed how Inuit metabolize fat - highly efficiently. The lack of simple carbohydrates and easily accessible processed foods over these thousands of years has resulted in an inefficient metabolic relationship with sugars. That's why Inuit have a higher rate of type 2 diabetes. With that said, eating raw frozen meat for Inuit, goes beyond nutrition. It keeps our bodies warm, after all eating meat filled with oils and fats is the ultimate keto diet - it's fat burning! The oils and fats that exist in muttaq, seal meat and caribou provide all the nutrients a person needs and a lot of it. We get vitamins A,D,E,K from this type of food. It's so nutrient dense, and hearty that we even have a special knife to cut the frozen raw meat called an Ulu, pictured at the top right of the infographic. Harvesting this good food required planning, expertise, and traditional knowledge. The act of hunting itself, aiding in cardiovascular health and the fresh air, bringing our lungs to life. The sun itself, also providing vitamin D, and a friendly smile. Sadly, with the effects of colonization and forced settlement, represented by the line drawings of tundra and iglu, many Inuit stopped practicing the traditional act of hunting by dog team as a result of the sled dog slaughter. The dog slaughter is represented by the pen drawing on the right of paw prints with blood red highlights.

Today, Inuit still eat traditional country food, it is the best for us as it has aligned with our bodies through thousands of years. We are innovative people, quick learning, and fast adapting. Our diets have changed, but our values have stayed the same. With harmony and balance at the center of life.

To learn more about Muckpaloo's art visit <https://urbaninuitidentityproject.ca/voices-documentary/> where you can read about her most recent documentary, *Voices*.

Artist: Muckpaloo Ipeellie, Inuk from Nunavut

Métis Artist Reflection

Creating and designing this artwork for diabetes care with aging and older adults was a journey I deeply enjoyed. It invited me to reflect on my own Métis stories, and on those shared with me by Elders and Métis Senators, as I continue building my own knowledge bundle about who I am and those who came before me.

Elders and community knowledge holders carry immeasurable wisdom. Many of these individuals are part of the aging and older adult population and are navigating life with diabetes. With that in mind, I first and foremost invite healthcare practitioners and service providers to care for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Elders with gentleness and humility, as one would care for their own grandmother. The stories Elders carry is shaped by lived experiences of wrongdoing, isolation, and disconnection. For Métis people in particular, this has included being told you are “not Indian enough” or “not white enough,” and being seen as less than, as a 'half-breed'. When providers practice patience, adapt their approaches, and listen with openness, they may find themselves learning something meaningful, especially from Indigenous patients they serve.

The artwork embodies Métis floral dot art, a contemporary style inspired by traditional Métis beadwork practices and first adapted in this form by Métis artist Christi Belcourt. The imagery also includes a moose, symbolizing both the restoration of Métis harvesting rights following the Supreme Court of Canada *Powley* decision in 2003, and the deep interconnectedness of Métis Peoples with the land, water, animals, and culture.

William, the Métis individual navigating his diabetes journey in this artwork, is imagined as a modern-day Métis voyageur. He moves through waters filled with twists, turns, and obstacles, much like the systemic barriers encountered in healthcare systems. When he is on the land, fishing and harvesting in relation with water and ancestors, he feeds his spirit. Through these practices, he supports his physical health, remains active, and can eat traditional foods while living with diabetes. Most importantly, when William is supported by care providers who respect him and understand his journey, he is better able to care for himself. Managing diabetes becomes a shared responsibility, strengthened by community, culture, and healthcare providers walking alongside him.

Artist: Sabastian Koprach, Métis Citizen, Georgian Bay Community