

Empowering Indigenous Health: The Indigenous Wellness Research Collaborative in Saskatchewan

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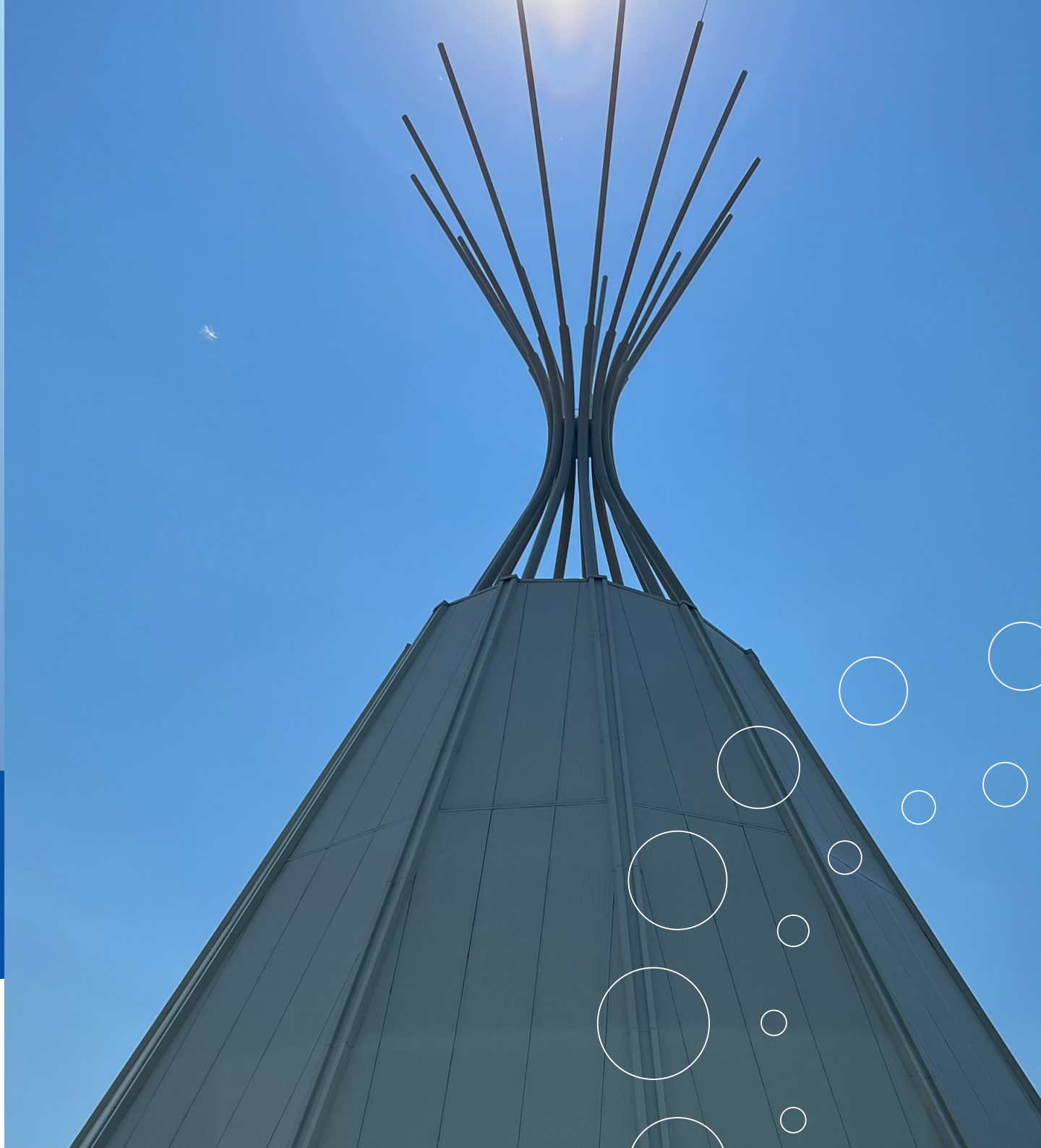


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Empowering Indigenous Health: The Indigenous Wellness Research Collaborative in Saskatchewan

The Indigenous Wellness Research Collaborative is a transformative alliance dedicated to advancing health systems and service delivery for Indigenous communities across Saskatchewan. Founded a decade ago and co-led by Dr Mamata Pandey, a research scientist at the Saskatchewan Health Authority, and Dr JoLee Sasakamoose (M'Chigeeng First Nation), Canadian Institute of Health Research Chair in Indigenous Wellness and Health Equity at the University of Regina, their team's work is rooted in a commitment to Indigenous leadership and community-defined wellness goals. Guided by the Cultural Responsiveness Framework, the Collaborative prioritises creating ethical spaces that serve as a middle ground for respect, reciprocity, and authentic partnerships. The team employs a strengths-based approach to health research, centering Indigenous methodologies that respect the interconnectedness of spiritual, mental, emotional, and physical well-being.

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Collaborative Approach

Health research agendas are shaped through collaborative discussions with Indigenous communities, academic partners, and health authority representatives from multiple disciplines and sectors. Drs Pandey and Sasakamoose engage with diverse stakeholders, leveraging the existing health infrastructure and resources within communities and the health authority to co-develop and implement interventions to address community-identified health priorities. The unique partnership between academics, clinicians, and community partners has enhanced research, clinical capacity, and broadened the team's funding eligibility.

The research results provide insights into the effectiveness of the interventions and create opportunities for the upscale and advocacy of practical, community-driven solutions. Research is a tool to identify community health priorities, develop collaboration with multi-disciplinary teams, access funding, and leverage research results for sustainable funding. Guided by the Federation of Sovereign Indigenous Nations Knowledge Keeper Council and the Western Region III Métis Nation-Saskatchewan, the research team fosters community-driven, culturally responsive health research that centres Indigenous knowledge and priorities.

Building Community Capacity and Self-Determination

The team extends its work beyond research by restoring Indigenous capacity with tools and training to support self-determined healthcare. Through training programs, local clinical teams gain skills in program auditing, data stewardship, and culturally safe care.

These investments strengthen community resilience and enable independent monitoring, adaptation, and advocacy for local health needs.

Real-World Impact at Multiple Levels

Over the past decade, the team has led several collaborative projects across key areas of health. Initiatives such as **Okawimaw Kanosimowin, the Mother's Bundle**, highlight the integration of traditional knowledge with Western science in culturally grounded maternal care and harm reduction initiatives. This holistic approach was recently recognised when the project was shortlisted for a prestigious Nature Award, honouring its innovative blend of Indigenous knowledge and clinical practices to improve maternal and child health outcomes. The team's work has delivered measurable, positive impacts at multiple levels

- **Community Level:** These projects elevate Indigenous leadership in setting health research priorities, aligning with cultural values. Community health teams have strengthened their capacity to manage chronic conditions and advocate for infrastructure improvements, laying the groundwork for self-sustaining wellness. Their achievements have drawn national and international recognition, showcasing community resilience and success.
- **Health System Level:** The work has fostered stronger collaboration between Indigenous communities and clinical teams, leading to low-barrier, destigmatized approaches to care. By integrating culturally relevant practices into both care delivery and administration, healthcare systems have become more accessible, equitable, and responsive to Indigenous needs.



- **Academic Level:** By blending Indigenous and Western methodologies, the team is redefining health research standards. This approach advances Indigenous health scholarship and inspires a new generation of researchers while encouraging institutions to adopt culturally grounded frameworks.
- **Individual Level:** Projects deliver tangible health benefits, improving access, continuity of care, and treatment outcomes. Many participants go on to become health advocates—sharing knowledge, supporting peers, and helping to drive a broader movement for Indigenous wellness.

Future Directions and Scaling Impact

Looking ahead, the team is committed to deepening its impact by expanding partnerships with Indigenous communities, elevating the voices of youth and Knowledge Keepers, and advancing new initiatives in food sovereignty, Eldercare, youth diabetes prevention, and land-based healing. Guided by community-defined priorities and key performance indicators, the team's research will continue to drive sustained, transformative change across health systems. The team is working to scale successful projects beyond Saskatchewan. By sharing outcomes nationally and shaping policy, they have secured funding for Indigenous-led health initiatives that serve as models for culturally responsive health research across Canada and internationally. Policymakers, researchers, and community leaders are invited to join in advancing a future where Indigenous knowledge and modern healthcare systems grow in partnership.

A Vision for Culturally Grounded, Resilient Health Systems

The Indigenous Wellness Research Collaborative is transforming health research and service delivery to be inclusive, community-driven, and resilient. Its projects show how research-informed programming can meet the specific needs of Indigenous populations while supporting the health system in becoming more agile and responsive. By addressing systemic barriers and guiding innovation in infrastructure and resources, the Collaborative offers strategies to strengthen equitable healthcare access for Indigenous communities. Grounded in Indigenous leadership and cultural values, it lays the foundation for sustainable wellness. As the Collaborative grows, we call on institutions and policymakers to adopt Indigenous-led research models and help build a health system that honours the strengths and aspirations of all communities.



^ Photo by Jayda Delorme.



The availability of a female community Elder to provide more comprehensive spiritual guidance to patients would further improve their hospital stay, and their presence would also immensely benefit parents who suffer prenatal or perinatal loss.

MEET THE RESEARCHERS



Dr Mamata Pandey

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Dr Mamata Pandey is a research scientist at Saskatchewan Health Authority in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, a province in Western Canada. Originally trained as a clinical psychologist in India, Dr. Mamata Pandey completed her second Master's and PhD in Experimental and Applied Psychology from the University of Regina in 2013 and a Post-Doctoral Fellowship at the Indigenous Peoples' Health Research Center, Regina, Canada in 2014. Having lived and worked in three different countries (India, Switzerland, and Canada), she has knowledge of diverse healthcare systems and services. Her expertise lies in engaging Indigenous people, refugees, and immigrants in health research. Taking a patient-centered approach, she employs health research to identify innovative solutions to improve the quality of care delivered. In the past decade, working in collaboration with multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral teams, she utilised research results to inform health programming, advocate for vulnerable populations, and address emerging healthcare needs.

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<https://www.saskhealthauthority.ca/our-organization/our-direction/research/who-we-are/research-our-team>

<https://reginaiwc.ca/mamata-pandey>



Dr JoLee Sasakamoose

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Dr JoLee Sasakamoose, a member of M'Chigeeng First Nation in Ontario, is a Full Professor in the Faculty of Education, Department of Educational Psychology and Counselling, at the University of Regina, where she has served since 2011. She was Department Chair from 2020 to 2024. She holds the CIHR Research Chair in Applied Public Health – Indigenous Wellness and Health Equity, leading nationally recognised, community-engaged research focused on Indigenous health equity and the decolonisation of mental health systems.

Dr Sasakamoose earned her PhD from Michigan State University and is a leading expert in culturally responsive, trauma-informed, and strengths-based approaches to Indigenous mental health and maternal wellness. In partnership with Dr. Mamata Pandey of the Saskatchewan Health Authority, she co-leads transformative research on improving maternity care for Indigenous women by bridging Western clinical practices and First Nations birthing knowledge. Their work has garnered millions in competitive funding and has been widely published in peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes.

In recognition of their impact, Dr Sasakamoose and Dr Pandey were nominated for the 2023 Children's Healthcare Canada Award for Leadership in Family and Person-Centred Care.

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FURTHER READING

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