



Statement on the Fourth Anniversary of Joyce Echaquan’s Death
September 28, 2024

Today, we honour the life, death, and profound sacrifices of Joyce Echaquan, a 37-year-old mother of seven from the Atikamekw Nation in Quebec. On this solemn day, we continue to feel deep sorrow and anger over the circumstances of her tragic death four years ago. Joyce spent her final moments pleading for help, enduring horrific racist slurs directed at her as she lay in a hospital bed. Her remarkable courage in recording her trauma shed light on the brutal reality of anti-Indigenous racism in Canada’s healthcare system. In the wake of her death, Joyce’s Principle was created to ensure equitable access to health services for Indigenous Peoples and to protect their human rights. Yet, the path toward realizing the goals of Joyce’s Principle remains incomplete.

This month, in a timely and significant moment, the Canadian Medical Association issued an apology for its role in perpetuating harm against Indigenous Peoples within the healthcare system. Reflecting on Joyce’s death, CMA president (2022–23), Dr. Alika Lafontaine stated: “Joyce Echaquan’s tragic death showed the failures of the healthcare system and how deeply ingrained anti-Indigenous racism continues to affect the care that Indigenous patients receive. This is not an isolated incident but a reflection of the systemic racism experienced by many in our communities. For reconciliation to occur, truth must come first, and trust must be rebuilt between healthcare providers and Indigenous Peoples.”

As Indigenous physicians working in diverse settings—on reserves, in small communities, and in large urban hospitals—we hear the devastating stories of Indigenous patients afraid to seek medical treatment. This ongoing mistreatment cannot continue.

We send our sincere condolences to Ms. Echaquan’s children, husband, family, and community. We also reaffirm our commitment to the ongoing work of eliminating anti-Indigenous racism through our organizational activities. We call on leaders at all levels of government and within healthcare institutions to take bold action to eliminate systemic racism. Indigenous Peoples deserve to access healthcare that is safe, respectful, and grounded in cultural understanding. Joyce’s death must not be in vain. The time for transformative action is now.

While we acknowledge the significance of the Canadian Medical Association's apology and the commitments from the governments of Canada to address Indigenous health inequities, words alone are not enough.

We urge the Government of Canada to fulfill its commitment to co-develop distinctions-based health legislation rooted in the principles of Joyce's Principle, ensuring equitable access to healthcare for Indigenous peoples without discrimination.

We call on the Government of Quebec, in collaboration with Indigenous leaders and communities, to urgently implement a comprehensive action plan to adopt Joyce's Principle and address the systemic racism that continues to plague its healthcare system.

Additionally, we call on all levels of government to act immediately on the key recommendations from numerous reports addressing systemic racism, including:

- The 142 recommendations of the Viens Commission,
- The 231 Calls for Justice from the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG),
- The 94 Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada,
- The 24 recommendations of the In Plain Sight report,
- And, the principles and commitments outlined in Joyce's Principle.

These actions must be prioritized to foster real, sustainable change, ensuring that Indigenous peoples receive culturally safe and respectful healthcare and services across the country.

To learn more about Joyce's Principle and to show your support, please visit <https://principedejoyce.com/>

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