

Indigenous medicine

Approaching the challenges with courage and humility

Story by Sarah de Leeuw

Remember that time, early in your career, when you received an award?

That feeling of happy pride when your name was called in front of your peers? When you were recognized for something special, when you felt that tingle of luckiness?

A bit like you, Dr Lisa Monkman also remembers receiving an award. The one she vividly remembers receiving was as an undergraduate medical student at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg.

Maybe a little differently from you, however, what she remembers most clearly was not the flush of pride or the tingle of happiness.

Instead, she remembers a comment hurled by a student in the row just behind her. Something along the lines of “Like *she* needs ANOTHER award. Natives always get them. And her schooling is paid for anyway, so why give her *more* money?”

Then Dr Monkman remembers the student beside her sticking up for her, shooting back at their colleague a comment meant to be a defence: “Are YOU going to work in tiny little reserves like Lisa is going to? We need more physicians who are going to work with Aboriginal patients in rural places, so you should support her, not put her down.”

Dr Monkman is some ways out of medical school now. She’s won many more awards. The event is long since behind her.

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PHOTO Dr Lisa May Monkman at work in a professional setting.

When she's not driving up to work in the small First Nations community of Brokenhead, Man, she practises team-based, Indigenous-informed, not-fee-for-service medicine in downtown Winnipeg; she was a founding member of the Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada and is now a Director on the Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada Board of Directors. She balances all of this alongside being a mother and a member of the University of Manitoba Faculty of Medicine. Her husband, already a member of the Legislative Assembly of Manitoba as well as being an icon in Canadian literature and journalism, just announced he is seeking leadership of the Manitoba NDP: it's a decision Wab Kinew associates closely with his marriage and life partnership with Dr Monkman.

Lisa, in other words, is a high-achieving family physician enacting change at almost every imaginable scale, from her family to her clinical practices, from her patients and their communities to the province of Manitoba and the country as a whole.

Still, the circumstances of receiving that award all those years ago, right alongside growing up Anishinaabe with 6 younger siblings in inner-city Winnipeg and a mother fighting to complete an undergraduate degree while keeping food on the table, continue to inform almost everything she does.

"Canada is based on racist and colonial laws," reflects Dr Monkman. "Indigenous peoples live with laws based on race. There are divides between people who live on reserves and people living off reserve. We live with huge disparities."



“ INDIGENOUS PEOPLES LIVE WITH LAWS BASED ON RACE ”

She observes that "people misunderstand Indigenous peoples all the time. And Indigenous students in medicine are still not safe. I think about getting that award. Yes. What that student said was totally wrong. I have worked part- and full-time since I was 12. My dad was non-status. My mother was my inspiration. She believed in education and working hard. We got nothing for free. Indigenous peoples don't. I was always good in math and the sciences. So. That student was being racist. But the other thing I think about now was how I was defended. It's like I was being confined to *only* working rurally, *only* working with Indigenous peoples, *only* working on reserves. Why are Indigenous medical students so often confined that way?"

It's a haunting question, that question about how and why Indigenous physicians, or Indigenous peoples more broadly, are imagined and confined in the minds of so many non-Indigenous settler Canadians.

It's a question Dr Monkman thinks has to be addressed head-on, by and for Indigenous peoples: "Colonization, racism, oppression: they work at this broad population level. Some Indigenous people will do well, but there's a ton of people with unrealized potential. Change has to be individual and at a community level. So, there does have to be mandatory training in medical school about Indigenous communities and histories. And that training has to be developed and delivered by Indigenous people. You can't 'imagine' the experiences of Indigenous people. You have to have lived our reality, our history."

Like so many Indigenous peoples in Canada, Dr Monkman's reality and history is chock-a-block full of humour, resilience, tenacity, strength, and ordinary everydayness. Her sons play hockey. Her community is Dog Creek, in the Interlake Region of Manitoba. She laughs when she mentions her mother-in-law, who's fond of "hootenannies." Lisa likes to teach yoga and she drums. Growing up in Winnipeg, she recalls a culturally diverse and tightly knit community. She never understood herself as poor: "Poverty is often relative. We were happy and well cared for. I never had 'less than' those around me. We were never uncomfortable. And my mum was always, always, working to do even better. During classes to become a teacher, she was breastfeeding. Her work ethic was a powerful example. I never saw becoming a doctor as anything but possible."

Still, and also like many Indigenous peoples in Canada, Lisa's reality and history didn't have enough Indigenous mentors from professions like medicine or law or politics. And her medical education didn't include enough Indigenous colleagues or an Indigenous-focused curriculum. "During residency, I was so exhausted. It was so unbalanced. There is just no space for personal happiness. I think in order to become a physician, you do have to have this foundational belief about yourself; you have to approach any challenge with courage and humility and with a sense you will overcome it, that where you're headed is better than where you're coming

from. The thing is, so many Indigenous peoples have had that sense of self eroded because of colonization and racism. It's like a brain trauma. And it will require huge support networks of other Indigenous peoples, of loved ones. Our Indigenous perspectives about the world are still underrepresented. And no one outside the community is going to discover 'the fix' for us. We know what we need for our own health and wellness."

Dr Monkman is part of the fix she envisions happening by and for Indigenous peoples. She is, in a way, more than the medicine she practises: she is, herself, a kind of medicine against the ills of colonialism and anti-Indigenous racism in Canada and beyond. It's not always easy, but, as she observes, "As a physician, you're in a pretty powerful place to give back. You can give of yourself, remembering all the time that really valuable things are worth fighting for, are worth the struggle."

Dr Monkman is an Anishinaabe family physician with experience in both rural and urban settings. She currently works at the ACCESS Downtown medical clinic where she provides primary care to Winnipeg's inner-city residents and homeless population. She recently founded an outreach clinic in Swan River, Man, with a focus on addiction medicine in response to local outbreaks of HIV and hepatitis C infections as a result of intravenous drug use. She is currently traveling once a week to Brokenhead Ojibway Nation to establish a medical clinic in partnership with the Northern Medical Unit and Brokenhead Ojibway Nation community members. She is a founding board member of the Indigenous Physicians Association of Canada and spends her free time pursuing health and wellness in many different forms. She is a certified yoga instructor and former member of the Nay-a-No and Neebin Noodin drum groups. She currently volunteers much of her time with several different advisory boards. She works with Returning to Spirit, an organization that seeks to heal the wounds of residential schools; the Mercury Disability Management Board; the organizing committee for the 5th, 6th, and 7th International Meetings on Indigenous Child Health; and the Indigenous health advisory committee to the Canadian Paediatric Society. **Dr Monkman** hopes to one day further her education in pursuit of a master's degree in public health and remains committed to serving the Indigenous community in Manitoba.

The Cover Project The Faces of Family Medicine project has evolved from individual faces of family medicine in Canada to portraits of physicians and communities across the country grappling with some of the inequities and challenges pervading society. It is our hope that over time this collection of covers and stories will help us to enhance our relationships with our patients in our own communities.

PHOTOS LEFT (Bottom) Dr Monkman and her husband, politician and writer Wab Kinew. **(Top)** Checkups with patients Stephanie Pollok and **(centre)** Dr Melinda Fowler at the Brokenhead Health Centre.

PHOTO RIGHT Dr Monkman on a stroll with her little dog, Guapo, in Brokenhead Ojibway Nation, where she has her clinic.

PHOTOGRAPHER Robert Lowdon, Winnipeg, Man

