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## Partnership to improve health care

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FORT QU'APPELLE -- Tuesday's signing of a tripartite memorandum of understanding on First Nations health and well-being is the first step towards improving the delivery of health services, says Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations (FSIN) Vice-Chief Guy Lonechild.

"That has been the missing link in this whole thing. We haven't had the health services that have been available to other residents in Saskatchewan and Canada," Lonechild told reporters.

Signed by federal Health Minister Tony Clement, his Saskatchewan counterpart Don McMorris, and the FSIN, the MOU establishes a

formal partnership to improve the co-ordination and reduce duplication of services, better adapt programs to meet the needs of First Nations and fill in gaps in existing services.

Lonechild points to the First Nations Healing Hospital in Fort Qu'Appelle as an example of a collaborative holistic approach to delivering health services that meet the spiritual, emotional and physical needs of First Nations people using the facility.

Calling this a historic agreement, Clement told reporters at the signing ceremony that "this is a revolution in First Nations' health care."

"For the first time there will be a true collaboration amongst the federal government, the provincial government and the First Nations of Saskatchewan," he said.

That collaborative approach provides First Nations with a greater say in the delivery of health services and respects their traditional healing practices.

"What that means for the average person is that the health outcomes will be better," Clement said.

The aim is to develop a 10-year First Nations health and wellness plan with the hope of reducing the incidences of heart disease and type 2 diabetes, which are rampant in First Nations communities, and improve the overall health of Canada's aboriginal population.

Pointing to the diabetes epidemic in the First Nations communities, Lonechild noted one of the glaring service gaps is the lack of accessible rural dialysis services.

"Rural Saskatchewan residents and First Nations residents have to have that service delivered to rural Saskatchewan. First Nations shouldn't be just studied to death. We shouldn't just have diabetes tracking systems but we should have real services as a result of some of these investments under the Aboriginal Health Transition Fund. We are going to make sure we get some results under this agreement," Lonechild said.

McMorris acknowledged that there are some gaps in the delivery of health services to First Nations people. They are not receiving care that the ministry would like to see them

receive, he said.

"There is some room for improvement and that is what this memorandum of understanding will move towards," he said.

"We hope to see results in the near future."

There needs to be a comprehensive approach to addressing First Nations' health issues, which includes providing clean drinking water and better housing on reserve and good road access to health care facilities, Lonechild said. He would also like to see an investment in infrastructure in the north for hospitals in Pelican Narrows and Onion Lake.

"We are committed to making a better future for our people in this province," Lonechild said, adding one of the priorities is increasing the number of First Nations people working in the health-care system.

Lonechild said he expects by the end of September a working committee will begin laying the groundwork to develop the 10-year plan.

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