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Unmarked graves were found in this cemetery near a former residential school outside Cranbrook, Canada

“Leaders in research built their careers on the suffering of Indigenous children”

Samir Shaheen-Hussain has investigated the cruelty inflicted on Indigenous children in Canada in the residential school system.

He tells **Roxanne Khamsi** what it would take to start undoing the legacy of medical colonialism

IN RECENT months, more than 1300 unmarked graves of Indigenous children have been discovered in Canada. They were found at the sites of former residential schools, facilities authorised and funded by the Canadian government to assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian culture. Between the 1880s and 1990s, 150,000 children were taken from their families and placed in these schools, which were largely run by the Catholic church.

The recent discovery of these graves has sent shock waves around the world and confirmed what many Indigenous communities have long maintained – that children sent to these schools lived in dangerous and traumatic conditions, and many of them entered never to be seen again.

The legacy of prejudice that led to separating children from their parents continues to affect Indigenous communities in Canada today. Until recently, for example, when Indigenous children living in remote areas of Quebec needed emergency evacuation for medical care, their parents were barred from accompanying them. Samir Shaheen-Hussain, a paediatric emergency physician, was part of a successful campaign in 2018 to change that.

His participation in activism for Indigenous rights inspired him to look more closely at the residential school system. In his new book, *Fighting for a Hand to Hold: Confronting medical colonialism against Indigenous children in Canada*, Shaheen-Hussain examines the role that doctors and scientists working at the schools played in perpetuating the system and endangering children's lives. He writes that not only did they let deadly diseases such as tuberculosis run rampant, but they ran unethical experiments on the children – including certain studies in which they allowed malnourished children to die.

Shaheen-Hussain spoke to *New Scientist* about how the residential school system is emblematic of larger medical injustices against Indigenous communities in Canada.

Roxanne Khamsi: Were you aware of the scale of the involvement of the medical community in the residential school system before writing your book?

Samir Shaheen-Hussain: Oftentimes, we only thought of it as being run by the government and churches, which is the case. But what was a surprise to me was the extent of the active role of physicians and scientists in causing suffering to these kids and certainly not preventing death – and potentially even sentencing these kids to death in many cases.

How did the atrocities at the residential schools come to light?

For decades, survivors of the residential school system had started filing lawsuits, which eventually became one of the largest class action lawsuits against the Canadian government and the various churches. After a settlement, there was this commitment [in 2008] that there was going to be a Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada to look into the residential school system.

In 2015, this commission estimated that up to 6000 children died at the schools, many from tuberculosis. Why did that disease run so rampant?

There are several reasons. One is that the schools were notoriously poorly ventilated. The kids were often forced to live in close quarters. From an infectious disease perspective, that is going to make it much easier for tuberculosis to

spread. The other element is that children were systematically malnourished, if not starved. And if you're malnourished, you're not going to be able to mount much of a defence against various infectious diseases, including tuberculosis.

What role did physicians play in exacerbating the tuberculosis outbreaks?

In the early 1900s, Indigenous children who were being taken away from their families and put into residential schools had to get a medical certificate. Physicians in that context could have played a role in making sure that children who had tuberculosis, for example, were not allowed to go into residential schools.

Similarly, even when tuberculosis was endemic in many of these schools, which it was, they could have prevented healthy children from going into them. Physicians could have played a role in essentially shutting down the entire residential school system by saying that it's not a healthy place for Indigenous children. But that didn't happen.

Were there wider consequences?

In the summertime, some of these kids went back to their community and then TB would spread to many in these communities as a result – if it wasn't already there.

The hospital system set up by the Canadian government for Indigenous people forcibly confined those who tested positive for TB. How did unethical tests conducted there factor into broader TB treatment in Canada?

In the late 1940s, the Indian Health Service boasted about being one of the first to experiment with the use of the antibiotic streptomycin and to achieve a breakthrough in tuberculosis treatment. What that shows is that these hospitals had a captive patient population of Indigenous people where the antibiotics were being tested. And then, when they were found to be effective, they were used in the wider Canadian population. That resulted in a massive shift from inpatient treatment to outpatient treatment for most of the Canadian population. ➤



MAZILA BETTACHE

Paediatrician Samir Shaheen-Hussain examines the legacy of medical colonialism in Canada in his new book

But the Indigenous population across Canada did not benefit for several years. They weren't given the antibiotic because Indigenous people were thought not to be able to be "compliant".

You write about a horrendous large-scale nutritional experiment, where some children in the schools weren't given adequate food.

It wasn't just the actions of a few rogue scientists. This was a far-reaching experiment that involved six residential schools across the country, and close to 1000 Indigenous children. That was totally supported by the federal government. These are not just random anecdotes. This was a systemic, institutionally backed and oftentimes publicly funded experiment that caused significant suffering. People who were considered leaders in research basically built their careers on the suffering of Indigenous children.

There was one case in which children at the Alberni residential school in British Columbia had riboflavin deficiency. Drinking milk could have remedied that, but they were only given half the recommended amount. Why?

What is surreal is that the suboptimal eight-ounce ration per day was maintained for two years to make sure that there was a "baseline" for these kids before tripling the daily milk intake to be able to then measure its impact. This is how monstrous these experiments were. They knew that giving these kids a bit more milk was going to improve their health. Yet they withheld it from them for two years.

What lessons emerge from the unethical medical experiments in the residential schools?

Consent can only happen when there is an actual, just relationship, a balanced playing field – including for Indigenous communities. That's the only context when consent can be given freely. Sovereignty is so important because once that happens, then there can actually be relationships that are developed based on a more equal footing. Then people can actually feel more free to either agree to be involved in various initiatives, including research, but also not to if it doesn't work for them.

In your book, you warn that, even though residential schools are closed, the separation of Indigenous children from their families and communities continues. How so?

In the 1950s and 1960s, as some of the residential schools were getting shut down, child welfare services were basically taking over where residential schools left off. In the

News of the recently found mass graves in Canada inspired public mourning in Montreal (right) and elsewhere



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residential school system, kids were removed from their families and their communities because government officials decided that, for whatever reason, their families were simply not able to take care of them. But that's obviously loaded with all kinds of colonial and racist biases and prejudices.

In the 1960s, social workers became active participants in that by continuing to place kids initially in residential schools and [later] in foster care or to be adopted. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Report basically said that there are more Indigenous children that are removed from their families annually than attended residential schools in any one year.

You were part of a successful campaign for Indigenous parents to be able to accompany their injured or sick children on evacuation flights in Quebec. What made that change possible?

Since the 1990s, there have been different major social and political events. One example would be the Oka Crisis – [also known as] the siege of Kanehsatake [a months-long standoff between members of the Mohawk Indigenous

community and the Canadian federal government] – in 1990, and all of these things up until and including the Truth and Reconciliation Commission report and the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls report that came out in recent years. All of these things have shifted people's understandings of colonial injustices.

If the exact same campaign had happened in 1980... I'm not sure it would have worked. It centred the reality and the experiences of Indigenous children and their families. So the fact that they were speaking out during the campaign to denounce what was happening, to explain the impact on them, on their families and their communities, I think that spoke to the public in a very meaningful way.

How do we learn from the tragedy of the residential school system?

We have to stop continuing to harm Indigenous communities. That means many things, like not removing Indigenous children through child protection services, but also it means things like making sure there's clean running water. There are dozens of Indigenous communities in Canada that don't have clean running water, where housing conditions are completely unacceptable. Those things are also a consequence of colonial policies and colonial laws, and those have to come to an end. Ultimately, one of the most important things moving forward is recognising the autonomy, self-determination and sovereignty of Indigenous peoples in this land. ■

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