Dear Program Planners

June 6th 2006

One of the most thought-provoking experiences I have had in my first year at McMaster has been taking part in the Aboriginal Health Elective organized by the Native Students Health Sciences Office. The discussions, readings and presentations fostered a beneficial combination of learning and self-discovery. Consequently, I would strongly support including Aboriginal students in an “Aboriginal health” segment as a core component of the curriculum. The Aboriginal Health Elective addresses several critical themes of the medical school curriculum:

- Different concepts of ‘health’ and ‘healing’
- Interviewing patients in a positive manner respectful of their beliefs
- Recognizing our own beliefs about Aboriginal people
- Recognizing discriminatory and ethically questionable policies by Government
- Becoming aware of historical and present factors that account for dismal Aboriginal health statistics, for example, in the areas of diabetes mellitus and suicide
- Recognizing differences in living conditions on the ‘rez’ compared to urban middle-class neighbourhoods
- Learning how Aboriginal populations respond to past and present racism, attempts to heal, re-establish their identities and solve the extant social problems

For me, this elective fostered an awareness of many problems in Canadian society and its relationship with Aboriginal people. It allowed me to see Canadian society from a First Nations perspective, and to consider how the health of a marginalized population can be affected over several generations by government policies. I also learned practical interviewing skills, notably in a vivid role-playing session with a “suicidal Aboriginal patient.” And it militated against those negative stereotypes of Natives which unfortunately persist in media and public discourse.

Whether a student encounters Aboriginal patients or not (and most of us will), the concepts addressed in the elective were of great importance. This elective was instrumental in getting me to think about the important concepts above, and I support making it a more central part of the curriculum.