A statement from the School of Nursing on Dr. Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond’s report on Indigenous-Specific Racism and Discrimination in BC Health Care

The release of the report In Plain Sight: Addressing Indigenous-Specific Racism and Discrimination in BC Health Care exposes the longstanding, pervasive, and systemic racism that exists throughout the health care system in BC. As a school educating health care professionals, we are adamant in our condemnation of this continued racism and discrimination experienced by Indigenous Peoples.

The UBC Okanagan School of Nursing, which is located in the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Syilx Okanagan Nation, has a privileged relationship with the Okanagan, its Indigenous communities and health care systems. It is a relationship that we highly value and we work actively to learn from our Indigenous partners. Nurses that graduate from UBCO are often on the front line of providing health services. We recognize the critical role we play in shaping the health and wellness of people living in the communities we serve.

Dr. Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond’s investigation and report exposes egregious and widespread examples of bias, stigmatization and systemic racism that are not only morally reprehensible but that also have dire consequences for the health of Indigenous patients. They run counter to our most deeply held values as health care providers—values that we try to instill in all aspects of the education that we provide to our students.

As Dermot Kelleher, Vice-President, Health at UBC said on November 30, our university will actively collaborate in the work needed to transform our health care system to make it accessible, safe, and a positive contributor to the health and wellness of Indigenous Peoples. Registered Nurses are guided by a Code of Ethics that requires us to honour dignity, promote justice, and provide unbiased, high-quality care. We recognize that we can and must do more to address anti-Indigenous racism directly and resolutely.

UBC Okanagan’s School of Nursing, as a key contributor to BC’s healthcare workforce, is fully committed to supporting the recommendations outlined in the report. Many of these recommendations are well represented in UBCO’s commitments to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action signed in the fall of 2019.

The School of Nursing has offered a cultural safety course to all of our students since 2007. It is currently being offered in collaboration with Knowledge Keepers and Adjunct Professors from Westbank First Nation. We are also proud that 12 per cent of our nursing students self-identify as Indigenous. All of these students bring unique skills, knowledge and experiences to the School of Nursing. While this is a good start, there is still much to do.

We will actively work to increase the number of Indigenous students and to create opportunities for Indigenous faculty, staff and leadership within the program and in the health sector more broadly. Within the School we will further identify specific actions that can support the recommendations of this report and of UBC Okanagan’s commitments to the TRC Calls to Action.

While the findings of Dr. Turpel-Lafond reveal a difficult truth, they also forge a path to creating a health care system that is free from racism, bias and discrimination again Indigenous peoples. The UBC Okanagan School of Nursing remains steadfast in its commitment to do just that.