



Head Office

Swan Lake First Nation, 200-200 Alpine Way, Headingley, Manitoba R4H 0B7

Winnipeg Sub-Office

1572 Dublin Street, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3E 0L4 www.scoinc.mb.ca

Phone: (204) 946-1869 Fax: (204) 946-1871 Toll Free: 1-866-876-9701

SCO CONDEMNS RACIST AND ABHORRENT BEHAVIOUR OF HOSPITAL STAFF IN JOLIETTE, QUEBEC

Atikamekw woman, Joyce Echaquan, victim of racism as she lay dying in hospital bed

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ANISHINAABE AND DAKOTA TERRITORY, MB — Southern Chiefs' Organization (SCO) condemns the behaviour of hospital staff in Joliette, Quebec, who uttered racist and degrading comments as a First Nation woman and mother of seven children, Joyce Echaquan, lay dying in her bed. Ms. Echaquan was able to record the repulsive behavior on her phone and livestream it to Facebook before she passed away.

"While shocking to many in Canada and the rest of the world, this video confirms what First Nation people and communities across the country have been reporting for years," said SCO Grand Chief Jerry Daniels. "No one should ever be subjected to that level of racist treatment. She went to the hospital seeking medical care, and instead was met with insults and judgements purely based on being a First Nation person."

Ms. Echaquan, from Atikamekw First Nation in Quebec, went to the hospital with a stomach ache this past Saturday, and two days later, she died. In the video, recorded on Monday, Ms. Echaquan is seen crying out in pain, while hospital staff insult and swear at her. One staff member called her "stupid as hell" and another criticized her life choices.

It is shameful that Quebec Premier, François Legault, and others in positions of power continue to deny that systemic racism exists. Legault's government has confirmed that Ms. Echaquan's death will receive a coroner's inquiry and administrative probe, to find out what caused her death. One of the nurses involved has been fired.

"Our hearts and condolences go out to her family and community," added Grand Chief Daniels. "At a time when they need to be grieving, they are dealing with the after-effects of the worst kind of racism. For too long, First Nation peoples have had to deal with this type of discriminatory treatment, usually out of view of the mainstream public. Ms Echaquan's courage in livestreaming the video has now shown the whole country, and the whole world, the level of racism and mistreatment that First Nations face. It also leaves us wondering what happened after the video was shut off, and why she died so shortly after."

While extremely tragic and heartbreaking, the treatment that Ms. Echaquan received is far too common. This tragic event has similarities with the 2008 death of Brian Sinclair, a First Nation man in Winnipeg, who waited more than 34 hours in Winnipeg's Health Sciences Centre emergency room. While others were triaged and helped, Mr. Sinclair passed away and developed rigor mortis before hospital staff attended to him.

"This case shows that little has changed since Brian Sinclair's death in 2008," concluded Grand Chief Daniels. "This year, people all over the world have been shaken by systemic racism and police shootings in the United States. It's amazing to see the support for the Black Lives Matter movement and we continue to speak out in support of the BIPOC movement. Now, Canadians must look inward and realize that systemic racism is prevalent across our country as well, and that we need to take real action, and end this kind of treatment."

First Nation peoples are some of the most vulnerable in Canada. Our communities have to deal with elevated rates of poverty, addiction, death and illness, all related to the centuries of colonialism, genocide, economic apartheid, and systemic racism. There is no reason that in 2020, a First Nation person from Manitoba should expect to live 11 years less than all other Manitobans, but that is the reality that we face. The gaps between our quality of life, and everyone else's, will only continue to grow until we take action to address systemic racism.

The Southern Chiefs' Organization represents 34 First Nations in what is now called southern Manitoba. SCO is an independent political organization that protects, preserves, promotes, and enhances First Nations peoples' inherent rights, languages, customs, and traditions through the application and implementation of the spirit and intent of the Treaty-making process.

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For Media Inquiries:

Vic Savino, Communications Officer, Southern Chiefs' Organization
Winnipeg Sub-Office: (204) 946-1869 | Email: Media@scoinc.mb.ca