



Did You Know?

National Indigenous History Month 2021

Did You Know? is a series run by the University of Waterloo Indigenous Initiatives Office for the duration of Indigenous History Month 2021. "Did You Know" posts were uploaded weekly on Mondays and Wednesdays, featuring information on various topics pertaining to Indigenous histories in Canada. Please share this resource widely.

MALNUTRITION STUDIES ON INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS IN CANADA

Warning: This document contains descriptions of abuse experienced by Indigenous adults and children.



Credit: F. Royal/National Film Board of Canada/Library and Archives Canada

During the 1940s and 1950s, Canadian government scientists used malnourished Indigenous populations as unwitting subjects in experiments to test nutritional interventions.

The work began in 1942, when government scientists visited several Indigenous communities in northern Manitoba and discovered widespread hunger and malnutrition. Their immediate response was to investigate the issue by testing nutritional supplements. From a group of 300 malnourished individuals selected for the study, 125 were given vitamin supplements. The rest served as 'untreated' controls.



In 1947, similar experiments emerged after government inspectors found widespread malnutrition in [residential schools](#). Over a period of five years, the researchers used almost 1,000 children at six schools for their experiments.

At one residential school, where it was discovered that students were receiving less than 50% of the daily recommended intake of milk, the researchers tested the effects of tripling the children's milk allowance. However, this testing only occurred after the children's milk intake was kept at the same, low level for two additional years in order to provide a baseline against which the effects could be compared.

At another school, the researchers conducted a randomized, double-blind controlled trial. One group of students were given vitamin C supplements and the other received a placebo.

Again, this testing only occurred after a two-year baseline period.

Children at a third school were given bread prepared with fortified flour that was not approved for sale in Canada. As a result, many of them developed anaemia.

The researchers also denied the children at all six schools from receiving preventative dental care. This was done because oral health was a parameter used to assess nutrition.

These experiments were not only unethical, but also bad science. They didn't appear to try and prove or disprove any hypothesis or make any statistical correlations. Although the school experiments were presented at conferences and published, they led to no important advances in nutritional science or improvements in conditions at the schools.

"They mostly just confirmed what they already knew," says Ian Mosby, who studies the history of food and nutrition at the University of Guelph.

Find more resources by browsing the [Indigenous History Month resources webpage](#).