

# Aboriginal children used in medical tests, commissioner says

Truth and Reconciliation Commission seeks further documentation on tests

[CBC News](#)

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Commissioners Marie Wilson, from left, Justice Murray Sinclair and Chief Wilton Littlechild of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Sinclair told CBC News that aboriginal children were used as medical test subjects. (Darryl Dyck/Canadian Press)

Aboriginal Canadians were not only subjected to nutritional experiments by the federal government in the 1940s and 1950s but were also used as medical test subjects, says the chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In an interview with CBC Radio's *All Points West* on Tuesday, Justice Murray Sinclair told host Jo-Ann Roberts that commission staff has "seen the documents that relate to the experiments that were conducted in residential schools."

Other documents related to experimentation in aboriginal communities outside of residential schools have not yet been obtained, Sinclair said.

"We do know that there were research initiatives that were conducted with regard to medicines that were used ultimately to treat the Canadian population. Some of those medicines were tested in aboriginal communities and residential schools before they were utilized publicly."

Sinclair said some of those medicines developed were then withheld from the same aboriginal children they were originally tested on.

"Some of those medicines which we know were able to work in the general population, we also have discovered were withheld from children in residential schools, and we're trying to find the documents which explain that too," Sinclair said.

CBC News has not seen the documents in the possession of the commission.

Recent revelations that the Canadian government used at least 1,300 aboriginal children attending residential schools in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario and Nova Scotia as test subjects have prompted further calls from aboriginal groups to pressure the federal government to turn over all archival documents related to residential schools.

"Our government recognizes that the relationship between Canada and First Nations has helped shape the country we know today," Aboriginal Affairs Minister Bernard Valcourt's director of communications Jason MacDonald said Wednesday in a statement.

"While we cannot undo the past, we can learn from it and ensure that those dark chapters are not repeated."

MacDonald said that is why the Conservative government apologized for the residential school policy and "that is why we continue to focus on the work of reconciliation, on improving living conditions for First Nations, and on creating economic opportunities for First Nation communities."

The commission, according to Sinclair, is in possession of the documents used by historian Ian Mosby to show that the Canadian government conducted nutritional experiments on malnourished aboriginal children and adults attending residential schools during and after the Second World War.

However, the commission has not been able to obtain documents "related to experimentation that went on in aboriginal communities outside of the residential school setting."

"We haven't seen those documents," the chair of the commission told CBC News.

Valcourt's office has said they have turned over 900 documents related to this to the work by the commission.

On Thursday, Assembly of First Nations Regional Chief Bill Erasmus told CBC News in a written statement that "the federal documents show that the government either doesn't know what's in its own records or that there may be an effort to actually suppress information."

Erasmus called on the federal government to provide all relevant documents to the commission.

"We believe that what's already been exposed represents only a fraction of the full, true and tragic history of the residential schools. There are no doubt more revelations buried in the archives," Erasmus said.

### **Ottawa ordered to provide all documents**

In January, [an Ontario Court ordered the Canadian government](#) to turn over all residential school archival documents to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and while the federal government has expressed a willingness to comply, Sinclair said "we haven't seen the documents start to flow yet."

The worry now, said Sinclair, is that even with the best of intentions Ottawa may not have the resources to provide all these archival documents in a timely manner.

"It's a question of capacity and whether they have sufficient resources and time to be able to get them to us before our mandate as a commission expires on July 1, 2014."

Sinclair said that if the federal government is unable to turn over all of the documents from Library and Archives Canada before the commission's mandate expires next summer, the commission may have to turn to the courts once more.

Many of the documents are said to reside with departments outside of Aboriginal Affairs, such as the Health Department.

But a final report without all the documents would not be a "truthful" report, according to Sinclair.

"The report itself, in our view, only complies with the mandate if we are able to write a full and complete history of residential schools and in order to do that, we need those documents," the chair of the commission told CBC News.

The residential schools system, which ran from the 1870s until the 1990s, removed about 150,000 aboriginal children from their families and sent them to church-run schools under a deliberate policy of "civilizing" First Nations.

Many students were physically, mentally and sexually abused. Some committed suicide. Mortality rates reached 50 per cent at some schools.

In the 1990s, thousands of victims sued the churches that ran the schools and the Canadian government.

The \$1.9-billion settlement of that suit in 2007 prompted an apology from Prime Minister Stephen Harper followed by the creation of the commission in 2008.