

Background Information

Teacher note: The purpose of this excerpt is to provide background information to support *Examining Cross-cultural Observations* MT. It is intended for use within the context of the *Modelling the Tools* resource only. Terminology found in the excerpt must be considered within the context of the historical time period.

The following excerpt is intended to help students recognize that anthropological accounts are culturally sensitive and, as such, may reflect elements of cultural superiority, ethnocentrism and stereotyping. This account details the health practices of First Nations people at the time of contact.

Health

When the French first arrived in New France, many were astonished at the general good health of the First Nations people they met. When many French became ill during the first winters due to scurvy, their admiration of First Nations people increased. The French were not only victims of the diseases mentioned below, but significant numbers suffered ... or were otherwise deformed. Many of these health problems were the result of considerable poverty in France in the 16th century.

Nicolas Denys, writing below, was not the only Frenchman to note the absence of deformities, as well as of disease, in the First Nations people he encountered.

They were not subject to disease, and knew nothing of fevers. If any accident happened to them, by falling, by burning, or in cutting wood through lack of good axes, theirs being unsteady through failure to cut well, they did not need a physician. They had knowledge of herbs, of which they made use and straightway grew very well. They were not subject to gout, gravel [kidney stones] fevers or rheumatism. Their general remedy was to make themselves sweat, something which they did every month and even oftener.

William F. Gangong, ed., *The Description and Natural History of the Coasts of North America (Acadia)* by Nicolas Denys (Toronto, 1908), pp. 445–446.

Adapted from Ruth Sandwell et al. *Early Contact and Settlement in New France* (Vancouver, BC: The Critical Thinking Consortium, 2002), pp. 33–60. Permission granted by The Critical Thinking Consortium for use by Alberta teachers.