Pauktuutit, the Canadian national Inuit women’s organization, has produced over the years a number of quality publications highlighting Inuit perspectives on important health and social issues. Several of these concern the impact of tobacco – an obvious priority given the staggering rates of smoking and smoking-related illnesses among Canadian Inuit. This latest volume is a worthy addition to the growing list of resources made available by this organization.

The main source materials for the book are interviews with 31 Canadian Inuit elders from Puvirnituq (Nunavik, Northern Quebec) and Aklavik (Northwest Territories). The interviews, funded by Health Canada and carried out by community-based participatory research teams, were semi-structured and focused on the subjects’ memories of their personal and community histories of smoking. The material is presented in three main sections: (1) Short quotations from the interviews organized into fourteen main themes, from “our ancestors never smoked” to “Elders’ advice about how to quit smoking” (numerous subthemes are also identified); (2) The full text of the interviews with each elder; and (3) Appendices, including: background information on the project, the interview form used, suggested activities for community-based smoking cessation groups, and an extensive list of electronic, print, and multimedia resources related to smoking cessation in Inuit and other aboriginal communities.

Overall, this book has much to recommend it. It is attractively presented, with photographs of each interviewee as well as engaging illustrations of each identified theme by artist Celina Iyyiraq of Igloolik, Nunavut. The elders’ hard-won knowledge and insights make for absorbing reading. The themes and subthemes are ordered and laid out in a logical and readable fashion. Particularly interesting are recollections of the lengths people would go to satisfy nicotine cravings during times of scarcity, even chewing pockets of clothing where they had kept their tobacco. Other themes relate to tobacco’s role in community social life, the negative impacts of smoking, difficulties encountered while trying to quit, and thoughts on how to reduce tobacco use.

Primarily intended as a resource for grassroots, community-based smoking cessation workshops, Our Ancestors Never Smoked should fulfill its purpose admirably. However, the book should also prove to be of interest to a broad range of readers, including children as well as adults; Inuit as well as non-Inuit Northern community members; smokers
wishing to quit, as well as smoking cessation counselors; and health professionals, public health officials, administrators and researchers. For the health community in particular, it could serve as a good starting point for incorporating “IQ” (Inuit Qaujimagajuqangit, or traditional knowledge) into culturally appropriate tobacco control activities in Inuit areas.

For researchers, the book could serve as an exemplar of how to carry out social science research in Inuit communities. The project incorporates community participation at all stages including research design, a focus on Inuit heritage and traditional knowledge, and a strong knowledge translation component. Researchers might wish for a bit more technical information on how the research was planned, carried out and analyzed, but this is a minor quibble; this book is recommended reading for anyone interested in tobacco control and smoking cessation in Inuit areas.

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