

Culturally Competent Healthcare **Fact Sheet**

CULTURALLY COMPETENT HEALTHCARE

As part of an aging society, the medical needs of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Elders are an issue of ever-increasing importance. With rapid changes in law through legislation like the Affordable Care Act and Medicaid expansion in some states, AI/AN Elders are also increasingly finding access to healthcare services. While the needs of AI/AN Elders differ somewhat from the general population in terms of specific disparities in health, the cultural beliefs and values of AI/ANs also require consideration. An understanding of broad themes in the belief systems of AI/ANs can enable healthcare providers to more effectively and respectfully interact with AI/ANs, to the benefit of the Elder and provider alike.

TRADITIONAL AI/AN OUTLOOK ON HEALTH AND HEALTHCARE

While the specific beliefs of each AI/AN nation vary and may be specific to that nation alone, there are some broader shared beliefs that apply to many. With regard to healthcare, the “Medicine Wheel” or “Sacred Hoop” is used by many for health and healing purposes. The

Medicine Wheel contains four directions; north, east, south, and west. For Tribes the directions have different meanings. It may represent the seasons of the year, the stages of life, aspects of life, but is used to reflect a more holistic view toward life. (1)



AI/ANs understand that people are interconnected to their communities, to nature, and to the spiritual world.

When confronting an ailment, it may be viewed as a lack of harmony between the physical body and the mind, spirit, and emotions of a person. Accordingly, many AI/ANs may choose to look towards western medicine to address the symptoms of an ailment while also pursuing spiritual guidance from traditional healers in their communities to recover from imbalance between mind, soul, and body, which is the root cause of the ailment. (2)

Traditional healers utilize medicinal plants and herbs as well as sacred ceremonial practices such as sandpainting or sweat lodges to help correct such imbalances in the patient seeking treatment.

Since the introduction of western medicine to AI/AN communities, traditional practices have often been viewed as “at odds” with “modern” medical practices. Historical oppression and motives to force the assimilation of AI/ANs into the broader melting pot of the United States have resulted in little consideration or deference for such traditions. (3)

CULTURAL COMPETENCE IN HEALTHCARE DELIVERY

In her practice, one Navajo physician found that being a “good surgeon” and a “good healer” were two different things. Using the advice of a traditional healer in her community, she began to incorporate the holistic approach toward treating the whole person – not just the symptom as treated by western medicine. More than an examination and treatment of a specific ailment, consideration of the patient’s whole lifestyle and their environment can lead to more positive outcomes. **The active participation of AI/AN Elders about their care and the doctors who can effectively connect with them, creates a better community of healthcare.** (3)

MEETING AI/AN ELDER'S NEEDS

In order for healthcare providers to truly meet the needs of AI/AN Elders, respect and an understanding of cultural differences is necessary. The Health Resources and Services Administration advised that the delivery of culturally competent care requires:

- Understanding of the patient’s **healthcare literacy**. This is influenced by such factors as education and income, but for AI/AN Elders it may most seriously be impacted by historical inequities in access to healthcare services and disparities in treatment.
- Assessment of relevant **cultural factors** that might impact the patient’s health. For AI/AN Elders, language and traditional practices are important cultural factors to consider alongside the many other aspects of diversity. (4)

Better healthcare outcomes for AI/AN Elders depends upon more than just providing the best medicine. With a better understanding of and respect for the whole individual - including their AI/AN culture, beliefs and practices – better healthcare outcomes can be achieved.

SOURCES

- 1). National Library of Medicine, www.nlm.nih.gov/nativevoices/exhibition/healing-ways/medicine-ways/medicine-wheel.html
- 2). Advocacy Unlimited, www.mindlink.org/online_courses/cultural_competency_6.html
- 3). Native Daughters, <http://cojmc.unl.edu/nativedaughters/healers/alternative-methods-still-important-to-native-healers>
- 4). Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), www.hrsa.gov/culturalcompetence/index.html or <https://youtu.be/dOZLf-RYvHk>