Historical Trauma - Spanning Generations

American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) have endured physical, emotional, social, and spiritual genocide in the past 500 years. From the Colonization Period that brought war, extermination, and disease to the Relocation and Termination Period that stripped them of their identities and communities, Native Americans have endured mass group trauma perhaps more than any other group of people. The traumatic events of the past have resulted in historical trauma, the collective emotional and psychological injury spanning over lifetimes and generations. Historical trauma is very real and can lead to many health problems for those who experience it.

The stamp of historical trauma is endured by AI/ANs living in urban areas as much as those living on reservations and is detrimental to the health status of the population. In AI/ANs the trauma can generate grief, fear, a sense of lost identity and culture, and a strong mistrust of the system that wronged them. Feeling misunderstood or unable to effectively communicate their health needs to a “mainstream” health provider, AI/ANs often refrain from seeking services outside of their culture even when desperately needed. Culturally competent and sensitive services are a vital part of quality care, and Urban Indian Health Programs value Native American culture, beliefs, spirituality, and traditions in striving for the overall health and well-being of their patients.

Culturally-Competent Services Unique to UIHP’s

Effectively communicating and connecting to patients in a meaningful way is just as important as clinical skill and requires an understanding of the patient’s culture and cultural values. Many Native people believe in a holistic philosophy of living and a respect for all living and non-living things. In turn they believe in a holistic approach to health, and that health has four basic components that are connected to each other: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. All components must be balanced to maintain or restore harmony in one’s life and achieve wellness. Specialized and unique knowledge and understanding of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) culture is what sets Urban Indian Health Programs apart from other health clinics and cannot be duplicated anywhere else in metropolitan cities. In addition, while culture is an essential mediator it is not the only thing that defines individuals as people. Other factors like environment, economics, social background, genetics, etc. all play a part in a patient’s health status. UIHPs’ experience and understanding of the AI/AN population living in cities allows for effective communication, diagnosis, treatment, and elimination of health disparities in patients.

Services for the Mind, Body, Heart, and Spirit

The unique quality of UIHPs lies in the ability and willingness to incorporate traditional and holistic medicine into their health services. Also, in recognizing that all aspects (mind, body, heart, soul) affect one’s health, UIHPs provide a number of behavioral health, social, and cultural services for patients to achieve maximum wellness. This innovative approach to providing care has recently been seen as the future of health care, with terms like “Accountable Care Organization” and “Medical Home” being used by policymakers. Urban Indian Health Programs have used this model to provide health care services for years, many of them for decades.
Primary Medical Care

UIHPs provide a wide range of medical services, including general medical care, diabetes care and prevention, health and wellness check-ups, vision and hearing screenings, simple procedures, immunizations, lab work, chronic disease care, women’s health such as PAP smears and breast exams, flu shots, urgent care, prenatal care, perinatal care, HIV/AIDS testing and counseling, and more. The wide variety of services, under one roof and tailored to combat the specific health disparities of the Urban Indian population, is key to preventing serious health problems and disease.

Diabetes, Nutrition, Wellness

South Dakota Urban Indian Health’s “Keya Project” provides services to patients with diabetes. Medical care is provided by nursing/medical providers, nutrition education by a licensed nutritionist.

The podiatry program at the Urban Inter-Tribal Center in Dallas, TX partners with Nike Shoes to provide a custom made orthopedic shoe for people with diabetes.

Women’s Services

The “Native Healthy Start” program at the American Indian Health and Family Services in Detroit, MI focuses on reaching At-Risk pregnant women and providing access to pre-natal care, counseling, and education.

Dental Services

The Indian Health Care Resource Center in Tulsa, OK provides primary, comprehensive oral health care and is committed to doing so in the context of family, culture, and community. Dentistry care promotes oral health education, self-maintenance, disease prevention and pediatric dental screenings to assess need.

Social/Community Services

Urban Indian Health Programs offer a wide variety of social and community services for patients and their families. These services connect the AI/AN community through cultural events and programs and play a huge role in helping community members maintain healthy lifestyles. “A few of the many services provided are prevention and education services, youth camps and programs, elder services, diet and nutrition services and classes. Arts and crafts, job placement, domestic violence, pot luck/soup kitchens, community health representative/home visitation programs, and more.”

United American Indian Involvement in Los Angeles, CA aims to provide healthy relationship education to AI/AN families. The Strengthening American Indian Families (SAIF) project offers family assessments, therapy, mentoring, etc., and provides educational workshops on communication skills, parenting, cultural values, problem solving, and much more.

The Seattle Indian Health Board in has a “Resource Advocacy” program to assist patients. Resource Advocates provide information and enrollment help for Medicaid, Medicare, Social Security, and other public health plans. They also help patients identify resources for other needs like clothing, shelter, transportation, etc.

The Nebraska Urban Indian Health Coalition honors their Native Elders through its “Tired Mocassins” program that provides special cultural, physical, and social activities for elders like arts and crafts, low-impact exercise, field trips, student visits, etc.

Behavioral Health Services

All UIHPs provide behavioral health services to clients, including mental health counseling, psychiatry, substance abuse counseling, education and prevention services, anger management and domestic violence, and a wide range of other behavioral services.

The Native American Rehabilitation Association (NARA) of the Northwest in Portland, OR is on an eleven acre campus with two sweat lodges, a gymnasium for cultural events, traditional drumming and dancing, and a separate area for a Fire Ceremony. Clients can also participate in talking circles, pipe ceremonies, White Bison Red Road Groups, cultural education groups, and traditional crafts such as beading and leatherwork and drum making.

The “One With All” project is a substance abuse prevention program and the collaborative effort of four UIHPs in the California area. Sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the project incorporates a holistic model linking prevention, treatment, and recovery with culturally-appropriate, evidenced-based services.

UIHPs use the Circle of Care rooted in cultural values to help treat patients with mental health issues like substance abuse, alcoholism, domestic violence, and more. The model focuses on solutions and highlights Native practices for healing, e.g. talking circles, Red Road, traditional culture, etc. The Circles of Care grant is provided by SAMHSA to develop a sustainable Circles of Care program.

The Seattle Indian Health Board in Seattle, WA has a tobacco prevention and cessation program in partnership with the Washington State Urban Indian Tobacco Program. The program’s message is preventing abuse by honoring the sacred traditions of tobacco.

Traditional Healing and Medicine

Traditional Healing ceremonies and traditional medicine are sacred and powerful. Urban Indian Health Programs provide a safe and trusted venue for American Indians and Alaska Natives to practice traditional healing. The Traditional Healing services help patients find inner strength and balance the mind, body, and spirit. Some of the traditional healing services offered include:

- Sweat lodge ceremonies
- Men’s, Women’s, and Elders’ Talking Circles
- Traditional medicine from Medicine Healers
- Prayer ceremonies
- Relationship gatherings

The North American Indian Alliance in Butte, MT has a “Medicine Wheel Group” with meetings every Monday evening. The group utilizes the Talking Circle, Medicine Wheel, and other cultural information to help patients with recovery and maintaining sobriety using traditional methods.

First Nations Community HealthSource in Albuquerque, NM offers a wide array of Traditional Healing services, including ear candling, aromatherapy, acupuncture, Reiki, energy medicine, traditional healing ceremonies, pregnancy and infant massage, and herbal consultation.