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At Portland conference, Native American doctors urge a return to old ways to cure a population hit by chronic disease

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Members of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde from Oregon welcomed the doctors attending the Association of American Indian Physicians Conference at the Jantzen Beach Red Lion Hotel by canoeing across the Columbia River Thursday evening and docking behind the hotel in a sunset drum and music welcoming ceremony.

Modern medicine's fractured approach conflicts with traditional holistic healing practices of Native Americans, who have the worst health problems in the nation, said a doctor addressing a conference of Native American physicians in Portland through Sunday.

"We've gotten away from the art of medicine," said Dr. Donald Warne, member of the Oglala Lakota tribe and director of the Office of Native American Health in Sioux Falls, S.D. "We are focused on the science of medicine."

More than 200 members of the **Association of American Indian Physicians** at a six-day conference are looking at ways to reduce high death rates afflicting tribes across the country.

"We need to address the underlying wounded spirits, the loss of culture, the loss of land and how that affects people's spirits," Warne said.

The doctors are discussing chronic diseases, **sudden infant death syndrome**, heart attacks, **diabetes** and other health problems that hit Native Americans harder than the general population. The life expectancy for Native Americans is 63 years compared with 74 for the general population, Warne said. In South Dakota, the median age of death is 81 for the general population; 58 for Native Americans.

The statistical differences continue: Death rate among Native Americans from diabetes is three times as high as the general population's; six times as high from alcohol; more than two times as high from accidents; and 60 percent higher from suicide. Health providers could help reduce those disparities by adopting some

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traditional healing practices balance physical, emotional, mental and spiritual health, Warne said.

Association of American Indian Physicians meet in Portland

A four-day conference of more than 250 Native American doctors meet in Portland to discuss Native American health issues (video)

A family physician, Warne said he's seen hundreds of Native Americans suffering at once from diabetes, depression and alcoholism. Diabetes fuels depression,

which patients try to self-medicate with alcohol, he said. Yet, they are treated by a doctor for diabetes, a therapist for depression and a behavioral counselor for alcohol abuse, he said, and those three providers typically don't talk to one another.

Warne said a traditional Native American healer addresses all those issues at once with medicine, counseling and prayer in ceremonies that might involve other members of the community or family. Balance is key to traditional Native American health practices, he said.

"We lost a lot of land, sacred sites, culture, traditional leaders, even language, and a different value system was imposed on us," he said. "Can that create imbalance? Well, yes, it can."

Drawing on traditional practices to help reduce health disparities that give Native Americans Third World life spans has emerged as a theme in the association's 40th annual conference.

"We need to address the underlying wounded spirits, the loss of culture, the loss of land and how that affects people's spirits," said Jared Jobe, who is Cherokee and health scientist administrator for the **National Heart, Lung & Blood Institute** in Maryland. "If we don't address that, we'll continue to have the same issues."

Jobe said public health leaders also could help Native Americans improve their health by urging them to return to traditional diets and activities, which included fish, berries, nuts, vegetables, and games they invented such as lacrosse.

"Traditional ways of living are extremely healthy," he said, "and this is the antidote to the harms of losing land and a way of life."

Members of the Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde from Oregon welcomed the doctors attending the conference at the Jantzen Beach Red Lion Hotel by canoeing across the Columbia River Thursday evening and docking behind the hotel in a sunset drum and music welcoming ceremony. Cheryle Kennedy, chairwoman of the 6,000-member tribe, said three tribe members are practicing physicians.

"I feel blessed our people are now reaching this level," she said.

-- **Bill Graves**