Health and Illness among Native American communities

Indians in the US face several serious health problems and have high death rates from many chronic diseases. This ranges from tribe to tribe, but in some Indian communities we see severely high rates of diabetes.

EX: Pima of Arizona (50% of their population – diabetes)

Why is this important?

The health of the tribe is crucial to well-being and the continuation of the community. If there is a suicide death rate 2-4 times higher than that of the general U.S. population the continuation of the tribe may be at risk. Especially since this death rate is among Indian youth. American Indian youth also have the highest levels of alcohol and other drug use among all racial groups.

Disabilities such as leg amputations, and blindness as a result of diabetes has a huge impact on the functionality of the tribal members and also threatens the well-being of the tribe. It also places more of a burden on the people to care for those with disabilities.

Trends in Indian health:

The top eight leading causes of death for Indians

1. Heart disease
2. Cancer
3. Accidents
4. Diabetes
5. Liver disease
6. Stroke
7. Pneumonia and influenza
8. Suicide

At least 6 of these are preventable

In addition to these causes of death Indians have higher death rates when compared to that of all US races. When adjusted for age, the death rates are for:

-alcoholism-578 percent greater than those of US all races
-tuberculosis-475 percent greater
-diabetes-231 percent greater
-accidents-212 percent greater
-suicide-70 percent greater
-pneumonia and influenza-61 percent greater
-homicide-41% greater

**Incidence and prevalence rates (the cases of new and existing diseases):**

Diabetes affects American Indians 2.8 times greater than that of the US population.

Here are some positive statistics:

The American Indian birth rate is 65 percent greater than all other racial/ethnic groups.

The number of women who have low birth weight babies has decreased considerably.

The infant mortality rates (death of infants) have decreased considerably over the past few years, but are still higher than the general US population.

Maternal death rates (death of new mothers) have decreased over the past few years.

Why do Indians have such disproportionate rates of disease?

Traditionally, Indians were very healthy and did not have the chronic health problems that they have today. We are all familiar with the infectious diseases that came with European contact. Even with the decimation of the Indians from such diseases as smallpox and influenza, Indians did not have heart disease and diabetes. It wasn’t until about 50 years ago that we noticed diabetes among the Pima and other tribes of the United States.

1. What happened during that time that may have had an effect on health? Why did diabetes suddenly appear?

2. Do you think that it’s biology? Genetics?

Social scientists point to the reservation era as the advent of chronic diseases. With reservations came poor nutrition, poor housing, poor sanitation, and poverty for many Indian tribes.

The socio-economic status (SES) measured by education, income and occupation is lower for American Indians in general and leads to a social gradient in health. Those with higher SES levels have better health outcomes than those with lower SES levels.
Health outcomes

Sociocultural mechanisms that play a part in the disproportionate level of illness:

Health care-access, quality, utilization; culturally competent care in a health promoting environment; lack of money to get transportation to the facilities or to have a phone; use of traditional healing services.

Health behaviors-account for 50% of illnesses; smoking, eating, lack of exercise, lack of seatbelts, risk-taking behavior

Environmental conditions-toxins, pollutants i.e. polluted water supply at one of the New Mexico Pueblos or the effects of the uranium mining or the toxic waste buried under the earth on Indian reservations.

Early life conditions-pre-natal care, post-natal care, healthy growth environment

Psychological Factors which encompasses feelings of self-mastery, self-esteem. How do you think the centuries of repression affect feelings of self-mastery and self-esteem?

Power –those with higher levels of SES have more power and control access to health resources

What is being done about this?

Public Health programs

-diabetes programs

IHS runs several diabetes intervention programs that address education and behavior change.

Diabetes Wellness connection is a Native American diabetes project designed for the Rio Grande Pueblo which emphasizes eating healthy foods and more exercise. They offer their curriculum to other professionals for use in the community.
The Native American Cancer Initiative for cancer

The Native American Woman’s Wellness Through Awareness project for cancer

-Zuni prevention program in high schools

Public Policy

-several non-profit organizations advocate for better Indian health through policy changes; these include the Association of American Indian Physicians; Indian Health Service, the U.S. Senate Committee on Indian affairs, and the national Indian health board.

Community Efforts

-The Porcupine Clinic Diabetes Prevention program on the Pine Ridge reservation. Screens kids, teaching better nutrition and holding retreats for families to get together to talk and plan recovery.

-The White Mountain Apache Tribe has just been awarded a three year grant to fight diabetes. They will create a wellness center and an intervention/prevention program

-The Mille Lacs band of the Ojibwe used revenues from two casinos to build a new health center in 1993. The Oneida tribe of Wisconsin also used casino revenues to build a new health clinic in 1996.

Keep in mind that these are only a few examples of programs in effect to improve health of American Indians.