

BEEFING UP HEALTH CARE ON THE RESERVATION

by Lisa Spellman



UNMC PARTNERS WITH NORTHERN PLAINS TRIBES

Charles Grim, D.D.S., was blunt when he spoke to researchers gathered for a 2006 advisory council meeting on native health research.

“Past abuses, real and perceived, have contributed to a general distrust of research in the Indian community,” said the former director of the Indian Health Service (IHS). The old model – known as helicopter research – only made matters worse.

“This was where some faculty member from some university descended upon the reservation to do research on Indians that might or might not address the needs of the tribal community. The person then left just as quickly as they had come, never to be heard from again,” Dr. Grim said.

The result: skepticism and a poor track record between researchers and American Indians.

UNMC’s 10-year relationship with tribes in Nebraska and South Dakota, however, has built a new model that’s allowed hundreds of tribal members to participate in studies involving diabetes, asthma and cancer. Here are a few of their stories:

Getting diabetes under control

Linae Big Fire is the project coordinator and director of Ho-Chunk Hope, a diabetes prevention program on the Winnebago Indian Reservation funded by a \$2 million grant from the IHS.

Peg Bottjen, an assistant professor in the UNMC School of Allied Health Professions, obtained the five-year grant to screen people for pre-diabetes and provide preventive measures through diet and exercise.

During the past 12 years, Bottjen has taught the people of the Winnebago Tribe about the importance of a healthy diet and exercise, trained students at the tribal college so they in turn could provide diabetes education and wrote numerous grants, one of which was used to fund a summer feeding program for the tribe’s children.

“UNMC’s projects benefit the tribe,” Big Fire said. “The university has a good reputation here. They’ve tried to solve some of our health care issues.”

The diabetes prevention program – one of 34 such programs in the United States – has been so successful the IHS extended it for a sixth year.

“WITH THIS STUDY, WE HOPE TO GAIN A MORE ACCURATE REPRESENTATION OF WHY NATIVE AMERICAN YOUTHS ARE AT HIGHER RISK FOR DIABETES THAN YOUTHS IN OTHER GROUPS.”
DR. JENNIFER LARSON

Since the Ho-Chunk Hope program began in 2004, 1,800 people have been screened for diabetes using a simple finger prick test. Of those, 181 people agreed to take the oral glucose test, which resulted in 68 people testing normal, 13 testing positive for diabetes and 100 who were found to have pre-diabetes.

Of those in the pre-diabetic group, 74 enrolled in the program and lost an average of 8 pounds; 56 decreased their fasting blood sugar to a normal range.

“The results prove we can prevent diabetes,” Bottjen said.

In another study, Jennifer Larsen, M.D., wants to better predict who will develop diabetes.

Dr. Larsen, associate dean for clinical research in the College of Medicine, is the principal investigator of the diabetes risk project, which was funded through an IHS Native American Research Center for Health grant. The Northern Plains Tribal Epidemiology Center, which is part of the Aberdeen Area Tribal Chairman’s Health Board (AATCHB), submitted the grant.

“The prevalence of diabetes is increasing across the United States, but particularly in American Indian communities, where Type 2 diabetes is more than twice as common,” Dr. Larsen said.

Within the American Indian population, the greatest increases of Type 2 diabetes are among youths age 15 to 19. The prevalence of diabetes varies from tribe to tribe, Dr. Larsen said, but is about 18 percent in adults for the Aberdeen Area Great Plains tribes, compared to 9 percent for the rest of the population.

Dr. Larsen’s project evaluates the prevalence of insulin resistance in children of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe of South Dakota. With the help of the Rosebud Tribal Diabetes Program, the goal is to identify the best predictors for diabetes risk in American Indian youths and identify new strategies that can prevent or delay the onset of diabetes.

“There haven’t been that many studies that identify the prevalence of diabetes and pre-diabetes in Native American youths, but information suggests that the incidence is growing faster in this group than any other segment of the U.S. population,” Dr. Larsen said.

“With this study, we hope to gain a more accurate representation of why Native American youths are at higher risk than youths in other groups.”

Dr. Larsen, a member of the advisory council for the Northern Plains Tribal Epidemiology Center, also serves as program director for the Native American Research Center for Health grant, which addresses health disparities.

Cancer takes a toll

Before one of her goals was realized, Carole Anne Heart, the former director of AATCHB, died of cancer, the second leading cause of death among American Indians.

Under Heart’s leadership, the AATCHB hired UNMC epidemiologist Shinobu Watanabe-Galloway, Ph.D., to help collect and analyze data on cancer among the Northern Plains tribes. The goal: improve access to treatments for members of the 18 Indian tribes served by the AATCHB.

The data will be used to write grants that provide access to screenings, cancer education and treatments – a big benefit to the Northern Plains Comprehensive Cancer Control Program at AATCHB, said Tinka Duran, outreach coordinator.

A member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe, Duran said the fear of cancer is monumental among American Indians. “They think cancer is a death sentence,” she said, noting the perception isn’t far from the reality.

“Diagnosis of cancer is often made at a late stage, when it’s harder to treat and often fatal,” Duran said.

The perception is compounded by a common belief that the rate of cancer among American Indians is low, Dr. Watanabe-Galloway said. But, the National Cancer Society reports a higher incidence of certain types of cancers in different regions of the country.

UNMC also is involved in two other projects:

Kim Rodehorst-Weber, Ph.D., assistant professor in the UNMC College of Nursing – Scottsbluff division, works with families on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota and the Spirit Lake Tribe in North Dakota, to identify children between the ages of 6 and 18 at risk for developing asthma. Her four-year, \$250,000 Native American Research Center for Health grant is ends soon.

Madeline West, M.D., an assistant professor of psychiatry in the UNMC College of Medicine, travels from Omaha to the Winnebago Indian Reservation once a month to provide psychiatric services to the tribe’s youths. She treats many children for depression and ADHD and said there is a great need for more Native American therapists. ☺