



Of Traditional Healing and Herb Gardens



Linwood Tall Bull, Director of a Montana residential living facility for Northern Cheyenne elders, spoke at UAA last week on traditional healing practices and holistic elder care. He captivated the audience with his stories, and impressed them with the simple but effective practices he had learned from Comanche medicine man, Edgar Monetathchi Jr. Tall Bull wanted to share this wisdom with Alaska health care providers to help them better understand their Native patients. Here is a sampling of the principles he shared.

North American Indians view medical professionals in the same way as traditional Indian healers.

Traditional Indian healers see their role as a facilitator, assisting the healing process which happens within the patient. They consider 50% of the healing has already happened when a person makes the effort to seek help. They use words of praise, encouragement and hope to prepare the patient for the healing journey. Native people are very adept at body language. They can tell if a healer is not happy to see them, or has no time to give. They believe it is bad luck to look the healer directly in the eyes and it may bring trouble to their families. This may make them appear unengaged to Western eyes. Tall Bull cautions healthcare professionals to be very careful with body language, and kindly in the words they use.

In contrast to Western medicine, Indian healing works from the inside out. Traditional healers can watch the daily activities of a camp, and notice the happy people, and those with anger, guilt or shame. Above all, they notice the quiet ones. Traditional healers infer a link between illness and bad emotions, which poison the body. Quiet people who bury bad emotions are believed to be vulnerable to cancers, amputation and blindness. Good health requires taking care of the spirit, mind, body, emotions, family and environment. Trouble in any one of these areas brings dis-ease and illness. People need to let go of unhealthy emotions, and use laughter and connectedness with family and friends to promote healing.

Each part of the body plays a different role in wellness. The feet are the foundation. A person's role in the family or community can determine the condition of his or her feet. To heal a person's feet, you need to examine his or her status in the family. If family members do not show respect or listen to a man's stories, he will have foot problems and no reason to heal. Tall Bull described his work with diabetic feet. Since people's feet are very personal, he would start by talking about shoes, and the need to look inside for tacks, stones, or burrs. He would gently lead a patient to take off their shoe, then sock and, as trust built, he would wash and powder their feet. Once the person's feet were cared for and comfortable, they would listen and be open to his teaching on foot care. Tall Bull's frequent travel meant he became intimate with the Gideon Bible. He noted that Jesus also washed the disciples' feet to ensure his message was remembered! Tall Bull believes such caring and respect for patients is necessary for healing the complete person.

Did you know... .

Alaska Native Medical Center has its own garden of Native herbs, outside the traditional healing clinic. Established two years ago, the garden contains a wide variety of herbs from Devil's club to wormwood, all neatly labeled. The garden is tended by center staff and harvested each fall by tribal doctors. Visitors are welcome.



Resources

Caregivers get healer's advice about respect. *Billings Gazette* Feb. 24, 2004. <http://tinyurl.com/4q7pe>

Circle of healing [Draft document towards a traditional healing practice model for Alaska.] R. J. Morgan. <http://tinyurl.com/6d58s>

An Indian's prayer. American Association of Indian Physicians. <http://www.aaip.com/about/prayer.html>

Traditional Medicine links. <http://www.arctichealth.org/tm.php>

A Walk through the U. Washington. Medicinal Herb Garden. <http://nlnm.gov/pnr/uwmhg/index.html>

Tall Bull also warned that the power of herbal medicines is diminished if the patient is angry. He considers trees to have significant healing power. He said, "Touch trees as you would the creator; don't grab them. Feel their heart. They can take your poisons from you."

Copies of Tall Bull's handout are available on request.



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