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SHINE-Serving the Health
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health INDIAN services

BARRIERS TO HEALTHCARE

Introduction

Healthcare is a key component of overall well-being in later life. Yet a lack of understanding of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) culture on the part of healthcare professionals can function as a barrier to much needed healthcare services for the AI/AN people. The purpose of this informational brief is to increase cultural competency thereby reducing potential barriers.

Culture

AI/AN culture is unique in regards to the value that is placed on traditional healing practices. Within traditional perspective, health is not viewed as just the absence of disease, but rather as complete and full balance within all elements of the person. This holistic approach to health regards well-being not merely the absence of disease but as the combination of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. The AI/AN people recognize that Western medicine may be powerful for treating disease in the body, but generally feel that Native American healing is of prime importance for a holistic approach. Because of this, healthcare professionals working with AI/AN populations should consider a combination of Western medicine with traditional AI/AN medicine practices such as, the use herbal remedies, participation in healing ceremonies with a medicine man, and involvement in sweat lodge ceremonies.



Barriers to Healthcare

Many social, demographic, and economic factors influence AI/AN Elders' access to healthcare. For example, Boston, MA reported the highest rate of disability for urban AI/AN ages 65 and up at 64.8%-61.3% vs. 46.1% for all races across Urban Indian Health Office service areas (Urban Indian Health Institute, 2004). 15% of Native Elders do not have health insurance, compared to 0.7% of general U.S. population (Upper Midwest Rural Health Research Center, 2007). Those living on reservation/trust land, in urban and rural areas, or in AI/AN communities are the least likely to have health insurance due to a limited awareness of health insurance availability on the part of AI/AN Elders and stringent Indian Health Services eligibility requirements. Healthcare professionals serving AI/AN Elders must take access barriers into consideration when arranging and providing care for this population. Call the SHINE Program (1-800-AGE-INF0, press 3) for information about health insurance options.