



Conference Report

Native American medicine: An introduction

Native American Medicine is a study of the healing beliefs and practices of indigenous peoples of North America. Native American Medicine combines spirituality and ritual to treat a wide range of physical and emotional ailments. This approach emphasizes treatment of body, mind, emotion, and spirit and dates back as far as 10,000 years [1,2]. The natives believe that dynamic energy systems interact in complex ways communicating shared memory through reciprocal effects upon each other.

Indigenous Medicine has been practiced worldwide from the Steppes of Mongolia to Amazon rainforests to the plains of North America. The techniques used are similar across several cultures. Indigenous medicine is based on animism, the belief that nature has sentient life force and all physical beings have a spiritual essence that is related to but separate from their physical aspect.

Native American Medicine has a role in modern medicine; however it is difficult to learn because, much like Chinese medicine, the art is learned by apprenticeship. The study of Native American Medicine may be considered more subjective but is also complex in practice. Increasingly, Native American healing practices are being requested by natives and by others. There has been a recent surge of interest in therapies of traditional cultures and spiritual treatments. National surveys show the importance of spirituality and religion to our population. Over 90% of Americans surveyed believe in God and over 70% name religion as one of the most important influences in their



Fig. 1. The native American Medicine Wheel is a circular arrangement of stones honoring the directions and dimensions of indigenous philosophy.



Fig. 2. The native American kiva in the southwestern United States typical of Pueblo Peoples. A round mud chamber for ceremony and healing with an underground portion and a ladder directed to the sky signifying connection between the spiritual and earthly planes.

lives [3]. Research indicates that patients commonly rely on spirituality and religion to help them through their illnesses; over 77% want medical staff to acknowledge their spiritual and religious needs and 37% wanted their physicians to address these needs more frequently [4].

There are parallels between Native American Medicine and Western medicine. A recent study by Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona is a landmark work for future work in Native American Medicine [5]. He conducted a series of meetings with traditional healers and then applied concepts to patients who had failed conventional western therapies. The meetings characterized concepts of Native American Medicine in



Fig. 3. Shaman Don-Antonio Moreno performing a healing limpia ceremony with author in the Peruvian Amazon.

eight points. The shared metaphor was healing is like a chemical reaction or baking a good cake. Healing in this study was defined as restoration of health, strength, and vitality. The eight concepts are:

- Healing takes time and time is healing
- Healing occurs within the context of a healing relationship
- Healing requires achieving an energy of activation
- Biologic systems behave similarly across hierarchical levels
- Distractions of modern life inactivate the catalysts for change
- Modern culture systematically teaches us to ignore emotions and maintain a low level of emotional awareness
- Physiological change often requires a break in usual daily rhythms
- Traditional healers spoke of the importance of ceremony or ritual as means of accessing help from the spiritual dimension for healing. Examples are the sweat lodge, medicine wheel, kiva, limpia (medicinal bath), dance or vision quest ceremony (Figs. 1–5). The treatment process takes 7–28 days and two to seven hours are spent per day engaged in therapeutic attention. The first week would be spent in contemplative self-discovery. The second week would include self discovery through service to others. The third week one prepares to re-enter the world and apply the Native American philosophy to their lives. The fourth week they engage in a Native American philosophy course. The shared value of this process is that no one path is



Fig. 4. Joseph Rael (Beautiful Painted Arrow) Tiwa Southern Ute Shaman at inactive Sundance site in the southwestern United States.



Fig. 5. The author and Shaman Don-Antonio Moreno in Peru after a vision quest ceremony.

right for all people. 80% of chronically ill participants in Mehl-Medrona's study showed significant persisting benefits at 5 years.

The conclusion of this work is not that all physicians, biologists, and pastors should become practitioners of Indigenous Medicine. These studies do suggest that the practices of Native American Medicine might add value and efficacy to our conventional model. Clearly more research in joining indigenous and western traditions in medicine is warranted.

References

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