Healing: Native American and Traditional and Western Medicine

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By

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Abstract:

Modern Native Americans are using a series of traditional medicine and western medicine to help with different illnesses and diseases that they are suffering. For a long time most of Western society has believed that the only way to treat people was through scientific methods that could be proven, although more and more these doctors and scientists are seeing the benefits of traditional healing. These two different practices combine holistic and scientific ways to heal. Holistic practices deal with the whole person, while Western medicine deals mostly with the disease inside of the patient. A few of the biggest diseases to hit the Native American population are diabetes and HIV. While traditional medicine cannot take away HIV, it can bring balance back to a person’s souls which help that person better deal with the disease. Traditional medicine is also being used to help with the diabetes epidemic that is growing through the population by reintroducing traditional foods native to the people’s diet, and has been found to have an amazing affect on diabetes. In this paper I will bring to light a few of the different ways that traditional medicine has been used today to help different problems and diseases in the Native American population.
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Healing: Native American Traditional and Western Medicine

How a person fits into their society, the problems surrounding their life, and balance within the universe are all topics that traditional Native American medicine addresses. The Western approach to medicine is to treat the disease rather than the person. Neither one is better than the other, but in the Westernized culture it is hard for society to connect with and believe in something that cannot be proven. Although it cannot be scientifically determined that traditional practices heal people, there have been many who swear by the benefits of a traditional way of healing. This paper will discuss and describe traditional medicine, and give examples of the way Native American traditional medicine and Western medical practices are being used in conjunction.

Native American medicine is very holistic (The New Mexico AIDS Info Net 1998). This means that the practice looks at problems with the total person who is ill, and does not only focus on a certain disease within the person and the means to treat it. This healing method looks to heal a person by bringing back the balance that they have lost. Each tribe has beliefs about how a person fits into their society, all of humanity, earth, and the universe (The New Mexico AIDS Info Net 1998). Traditional medicine aims to restore harmony so that a person can feel connected again.
Like Chinese medicine, and Indian Ayurveda, which also emphasize treating the body, mind, and spirit, Native Americans feel that a person’s health is tied to everything surrounding that person (Whole Health MD 2000). The healing practice encourages the harmony within the person as well as the community, and the person’s physical and spiritual world. Religion is something that is very much left out of Western Medicine. Like Traditional practices, religion cannot be scientifically proven to help a person; therefore, it is largely forgotten by the Western medical community.

As seen in other cultures, people do not always have to have scientific proof of illness and disease, or what causes the sickness, to feel that something is not right. In Cancer in the Community, Martha Balshem (1993) pointed out the fact that many people in the book felt that cancer was caused by a blow to the chest, surgery, or an assortment of other things. To some, it may seem absurd to think that surgery causes cancer, but as it later turned out surgery did have a hand to play in cancer in certain communities.

Scientific proof does help some people to trust a certain kind of beliefs and practices, but science only sees the world in its partiality, and is too arrogant to believe in anything that the scientist cannot control in a laboratory (1993: 84).

Native American medicine is much like medicine practiced in the Hmong culture. In the book, The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down, Anne Fadiman (1997) speaks of twix neebs, who were the traditional healers for the Hmong. These healers knew that a person must be treated, body and soul (1997: 33). If only one aspect of a person was treated then healing would never occur. There is a strong correlation between the two, and one cannot survive or function without the other. When the Hmong people came to
the United States they could not understand how a doctor could treat a person without mentioning their soul (1997: 33).

For over 10,000 years Native Americans have practiced their traditional medicine (Whole Health MD 2000). If it has been used that long, and there is still a vibrant Native American population, then there must be some truth to the ways in which they practice medicine. Although there are many different Native American tribes throughout the country, there are a few practices that are shared among most groups. The treatments applied differ from patient to patient and the seriousness of his or her ailment. Taken into consideration are a person’s deeds in the past, and their emotional state of mind (Whole Health MD 2000).

First, there is usually the involvement of a medicine man, woman, or shaman. Some Native Americans find the last term inappropriate because of the European origin of the word. The healer is used as an intermediary between this world and the spiritual world (Whole Health MD 2000). They understand the ways in which to talk to the spirits and ask for help on behalf of the person in need. Unlike Western medicine that takes years of schooling, traditional healer’s knowledge may come from ancestors, or have been passed on from another healer (Whole Health MD 2000). Even though the power of a healer can be passed on from a person’s ancestors, it still takes years of training in order to fully understand their powers.

Beyond medical treatment, a healer is also called to retrieve a person’s spirit. Single, or multiple approaches may be used in order to help a person, and the healer may call on spirit guides in order to return a person’s spirit (Whole Health MD 2000). This is
similar to the Hmong culture, which calls on a *twix neeb* when a person’s soul has wondered off (Fadiman 1993: 100).

Next, there is usually the use of herbal remedies. Of the top ten selling herbs in the United States, seven of those are herbs that have been used by Native American healers (Whole Health MD 2000). Throughout different tribes, the medicines that are used in healing change to fit the needs of the region, as well as the plants that are found in the area (White 2003). The herbs are not universal throughout all tribes, so it seems that for the most part there is not just one medicine that is right for one certain ailment. This view is different than that of Western Medicine, which feels that one ailment can only have one cure.

The third aspect of Native American medicine is purification or purging the body of sickness. This can be done in a number of different ways including sweat lodges, talking circles, the smoking of a pipe or vision quests (The New Mexico AIDS Info Net 1998). In the Lakota tribe, smoking the pipe is like praying. The smoke is prayers and requests, which rise out of the bowl of the pipe to float away to the spirits (Erdoes and Lame Deer 1972: 110). These different techniques are only part of reestablishing a person’s balance. They are not traditional healing within themselves, but steps to follow in order to become whole (National Library of Medicine 2004).

There are also other rituals and ceremonies held with the purification rituals. Such things as the medicine wheel and the sacred hoop, are used by the Lakota and Navajo tribes (Whole Health MD 2000). To the Lakota the circle is very important. They feel that nature wants things to be round, and therefore to use the hoop in ceremony is to help bring things back to their natural harmony (Erdoes and Lame Deer 1972: 110).
There is also a community healing ceremony called a sing, which lasts from 2 to 9 days and is lead by a singer who is highly trained (Whole Health MD 2000). Feathers and rattles may also be utilized in order to remove blockages and stale energy that may be hurting the person and making them ill (Whole Health MD 2000). Depending on the help needed, the Lakota use a gourd rattle filled with pieces of flesh cut from the arm of a person who cares about the sick, which makes the person strong of heart (Erdoes and Lame Deer 1972: 5). This may seem like a terrible thing for people to do to themselves, but in the bigger picture the person cutting the skin on their arm is making a sacrifice of their body in order for another person to get well. This shows how much one person cares for another. Drumming is also used in healing ceremonies to place a person’s spirit in line with the heartbeat of Mother Earth. With all of this, traditional medicine is not as simple as just prescribing medicine; the healing process takes time and investment by the healer and patient as well as the community around them.

Increasingly, Western medicine is incorporating aspects of the Traditional Native American medicine into their practices. At the same time, many healers feel that each practice deals with a different aspect of the person, therefore it is fine to use both methods simultaneously. While there is a growth of combining traditional and Western medicine to help those that are ill, there are also practitioners who are opposed to the mixing of the two, and do not see the value of each. The physicians who are open to the idea of using both methods for treatment are located in areas where there is a large population of Native Americans (National Library of Medicine 2004).

Non-native Americans are also exploring the benefit of traditional medicine, although they do so without the involvement of religion. Some traditional healers have a
hard time using their healing remedies on people who have not grown up in the native culture. The ceremonies usually involve more than a person realizes. Using only one technique does not qualify for healing to most people. The use of a sweat lodge for example will mean something different to a person who was raised in that kind of setting than it will for a person who was raised in a culture that never used sweat lodges for ceremony. Also it is hard to know whether or not a healer is legitimate or not. True healers usually only practice their medicine within their villages, although some practice as public conferences (National Library of Medicine 2004). Usually only other healers know if a person is a true healer or not.

One of the reasons that western physicians do not see the importance of the use of traditional medicine is because they are not native themselves. The majority of Western doctors are white. As of 2002 there were less than 200 American Indians in the medical field (Long 2004). Native Americans are the sparsest ethnic group in the medical profession with only seven percent headed towards that line of work (Long 2004). The problem lies early within the student’s lives. Dr. Lori Arviso-Alvord, dean of multicultural affairs at Dartmouth College, feels that students need a stronger foundation in primary and secondary school in order to give them the confidence needed in order to be able to do the work required of them in college and succeed (Long 2004). As of this point in time there are only two Navajo surgeons in the country, Dr. Arviso-Alvord, named above, and Dr. Taylor McKenzie (Long 2004). With this small number of Native American doctors within Western medicine, it is no wonder there is hesitancy towards a medical practice that white culture has a hard time understanding.
Another Native American who has been trained within Western medicine is Dr. Terry Maresca. She is a Mohawk Indian who received her training in New York from the Albert Einstein College of Medicine (White 2003). She feels that she can bring the best scientific method and healing practices to heal patients, plus incorporate her traditional knowledge of native ways and medicinal plants from her culture (White 2003). She points out that although she is versed in her native ways she does not consider herself a traditional healer. The difference is within the path that she has chosen. Physicians choose to go to college and learn scientific method on their own choice, while the community usually chooses traditional healers based on their family background or different experiences they have had (White 2003). Unlike a college setting, a person trained in a traditional way is taught more one on one as an apprentice, and not through books and lecture halls (White 2003).

Dr. Maresca works at a clinic where she practices a mixture of the Western medicine she has learned, and teaches people how to gather, prepare, and use medicinal plants (White 2003). She has been instrumental in starting a garden for her community in which traditional medicinal plants are grown (White 2003). The goal of this has been to bring health care to the community while instilling valuable knowledge about traditional medicine for the people of her culture to use. Dr. Maresca disagrees with large drug companies, which go into traditional communities to take the knowledge of plants used for medicine and use them for profit (White 2003). She feels that these companies to no study the plant thoroughly enough and the flora known commonly to one group of people could have a totally different use to another group. If the pharmaceutical companies take
only one use of the plant to sell in a large market they are missing out on other uses for the same drug.

There are different instances where Traditional Native American Medicine and Western Medicine have been brought together to help people who have been sick. One of these examples is with people suffering from HIV. Although the traditional healers cannot take away the disease, they can bring back the balance a person has lost by going through other treatment. Traditional healers can re-establish a feeling of connectedness with a person’s tribe and community. The use of this practice can restore a person spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically (The New Mexico AIDS Info Net 1998). When dealing with a disease that there is no cure for, healing a person’s spirit can be just as important, or more so, than healing the body. Healing the soul helps that person to be better able to deal with HIV and coming to terms with their life and the world around them.

Another instance where traditional ways are being used in Western medicine is in the use of desert foods to help with diabetes. Diabetes is a disease that has strongly hit Native American populations. Up to fifty percent of the indigenous population of Arizona suffer from the disease, and in Mexico over 3,800,000 native people are living with the ailment (Nelson 2001: 66). Within Arizona sixty five percent of the Yeome people have diabetes (2001: 67). This is largely due to the change in people’s diets over the years. At one time traditional foods, such as corn, beans, and squash, were the main source of food (Nelson 2001: 66). With the colonization of the United States, and increased interaction with white culture, the Indians diets have changed to more sugar filled foods high in fat. Recently though, groups like Native Seeds/SEARCH, Tohono
O'odham Community Action, Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, and the Tucson Indian Health Center are working with traditional foods grown in the desert to help reduce the risk of diabetes (Nelson 2001: 67).

In particular the use of mesquite beans has been promoted. These beans filled with fiber, thirty to forty percent insoluble and five to ten percent soluble, have for years been used to treat problems of the throat, stomach and intestines (Nelson 66: 2001). More recently though, the mesquite beans, or *kui* as they are natively known, are being recommended to patients because they slow the digestion and absorption of sugar, and they also reduce the blood cholesterol levels (2001: 67). One native, Janos Wilder, who has been eating foods that grow in the desert remarked, “I really feel a sense of [connection] to where I am and the people who have lived here before me.” While the use of the traditional food has had benefits on Wilder's health, it has also brought about the feeling of connection to those who have come before him. The relationship between himself, the traditional foods, and diabetes is a quintessential part of the mixture of traditional and Western medicine. In working together they are benefiting the whole person.

The use of sweat lodges has become a popular way to deal with alcoholism in treatment programs. A sweat lodge is usually a small circular structure made of willow branches and covered with blankets, or sometimes mud (Whole Health MD 2000). Here water is ladled onto hot stones that produce steam while the healer, patient, and any other helpers sing or pray (Whole Health MD 2000). The lodge is completely dark, and is meant to purify the body and cleanse it of all disease (Erdoes and Lame Deer 1972: 4).
In the 1960's the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism provided treatment for alcoholics to those of Native American background (Hall 1985: 134). The control was later turned over to the Indian Health Service which then gave control to individual tribes (1985: 134). In the 1980's the Native American Rights Fund found that the presences of sweat lodges had spread to the local jails, which had been holding Native American prisoners (1985: 134). The program was not made mandatory, but was found to have better results than a program without. It was also found that the sweat lodge was used more frequently if it was within a group that took part in the Native American Church, or a group that used a medicine man on a regular basis (1985: 134). The use of the sweat lodge has become more important to Native Americans and their use of it while practicing their traditional culture. While mainstream white culture has helped to incorporate alcohol into Native American culture, it is the Native American culture that will help to overcome the problem. In a study of use of sweat lodges within different native communities it was found that the use of the sweat lodge was only used less in certain communities because they had a wealth of other tribal rituals from which to draw (Hall 1985: 135). The emergence of the use of sweat lodges within alcohol treatment programs shows how flexible the Native American ritual is within the Western model of alcohol treatment. It does not have to only be used within a certain setting; it can change and move to encompass different problems within the community.

The above paper has described traditional medicine and a few ways in which it has been used with Western medicine to heal patients. Traditional medicine is a holistic approach to healing in which the whole person is treated, not just the disease. Treating only an illness such as Western medicine does takes away the personal aspect of a cure
for the whole person. Traditional medicine looks at balancing the person and the larger goal is to restore a person’s harmony to the people and world around them. Treatment, like that of the sweat lodge, relies on the community to help heal an ailing person and support them through a time of need. The Western approach is more of a one on one contrast to the traditional way of healing. It is important to see that the scientific practice of Western medicine and the traditional ways of Native Americans both have a lot to offer each other. In order to help the whole person both practices should be more widely accepted by all cultures.
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