



NATIVE PEOPLES' CONCEPTS OF HEALTH AND ILLNESS

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In an interview with the director of the National Library of Medicine, Nainoa Thompson shares his story for *Native Voices*. Born in Honolulu, Nainoa Thompson is chair of the board of trustees for Kamehameha Schools and a member of the Board of Regents for the University of Hawai'i. In addition, he has been lead navigator on long-distance voyages of the Hōkūle'a.

Courtesy National Library of Medicine

Speaking with the director of the National Library of Medicine, Jeffrey Henderson, M.D. addresses the importance of health information to improve the care of Native peoples. Dr Henderson, Cheyenne River Sioux, is president and CEO of the Black Hills Center for American Indian Health, an organization committed to conducting research to better educate Native Americans on an array of health issues, from tobacco control to cancer.

Courtesy National Library of Medicine



Katherine Gottlieb speaks about her ideas regarding good health for Alaska Natives. Katherine Gottlieb, president and CEO of the Southcentral Foundation—an Alaska Native healthcare organization in Anchorage, Alaska that provides traditional and Western medicine, launched the Family Wellness Warriors Initiative to address domestic abuse and child neglect in Alaska Native communities.

Courtesy National Library of Medicine



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Health, illness, and cultural life form a unique and interconnected relationship in the lives of Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians. Though their beliefs and practices vary—Native peoples are far from a single, homogeneous group—shared values and experiences have helped reinforce the importance of community, spirit, and the land for countless generations.

In this exhibition you will hear native voices speak of the responsibilities of the individual, the interconnectedness of communities, and of reverence for nature, tradition, and the Great Spirit. You will also hear about the challenges and opportunities of balancing traditional medicine ways with Western medicine.

Native concepts of health and illness have sustained diverse peoples since ancient times. Explore this exhibition and learn how revival and pride in native ideas among a new generation can help sustain them in the twenty-first century.

Many traditional healers believe that every person has responsibility for his or her proper behavior and health, and that healing is often done by the patient. Healers therefore serve as facilitators and counselors, often using stories, humor, music, tobacco, smudging, medicinal plants and herbs, and related ceremonies to bring their healing energies into the healing space.



Michael Hackwith (USMC, Ret.),
Lakota Sundance
spiritual leader, 2010
Courtesy U.S. Air Force/
Monica Mendoza

Community is an essential aspect of Native peoples' conceptions of health and wellness. Many games that have been played by Native individuals for generations, including stickball, reinforce the importance of group cooperation, along with strength and skill.



World Stickball Championship,
Choctaw, Mississippi, 2009
Courtesy Bryant Hawkins

Today, some health care centers for Native people provide a range of services, including traditional medicine ways and Western medical treatments, such as the Dr. Agnes Kalaniho'okaha Cope Native Hawaiian Traditional Healing Center, located in O'ahu, Hawai'i.

Dr. Agnes Kalaniho'okaha Cope
Native Hawaiian Traditional
Healing Center, 2010
Courtesy Waianae Coast
Comprehensive Health Center

Reverence for tradition, tribal elders, and a Supreme Being have been fundamental to Native health and culture for generations. Despite centuries of detrimental U.S. government policy, Native traditions and values—including loyalty and military service—have been kept alive and are being taught to a new generation.



Navajo Code Talkers Henry Bake and
George Kirk, operating a portable
radio set in the South Pacific, 1943
Courtesy National Archives
and Records Administration

Based in Oakland, California, the Native American Health Center addresses the medical and cultural needs of Native Americans living in the urban community by offering a wide range of Western medical services and helping patients obtain traditional healing care.



The Native American Health Center,
front view (facing east) with
medicine wheel and art totem, 2010
Courtesy Native American
Health Center, Oakland

Ancestors of Native Hawaiians traveled in voyaging canoes from Polynesia to Hawai'i in search of more hospitable and healthier lands or to explore the open ocean. The voyaging canoe's resurgence began in 1976 with the traditionally built Hōkūle'a, which traveled 5,000 miles between Hawai'i and Tahiti during its maiden voyage. Since then, a growing interest in the Hōkūle'a has sparked a cultural revival, inspiring many Native Hawaiians to learn more about their traditions.

Situated in the herb garden of the National Library of Medicine, the healing totem promotes well-being and calls forth an awareness of the interconnection between life and the environment, the source of medicinal plants and herbs. Jewell Praying Wolf James, a master carver of the Lummi nation, designed and carved the totem from a 500-year-old red cedar in his home state of Washington. The totem then traveled 4,400 miles across the country to its current location, making stops for blessings by 13 Native communities along the way. On the healing totem, symbols of the sky, earth, water, and woman tell the Algonquin story of the Medicine Woman in the Moon and represent the link between humanity and nature, and the wisdom and leadership of women healers. Two carved benches flank the totem, each depicting the story of the Bear and the Steelhead and the story of the Raven and the Sun from the Salish people.

Healing Totem Pole installed in at the
National Library of Medicine, 2011
Courtesy National Library of Medicine

Hōkūle'a under sail
Courtesy Monte Costa