

11. Significance for Native American Learners

There are 8 state-recognized Native American tribes living within Virginia. These are the Chickahominy (Providence Forge, VA), the Eastern Chickahominy (Providence Forge, VA), the Mattaponi (West Point, VA), the Monacan Nation (Madison Heights, VA), the Nansemond (Chesapeake, VA), the Pamunkey (King William, VA), the Rappahannock (Indian Neck, VA), and the Upper Mattaponi (Mechanicsville, VA). All but the Mattaponi and the Pamunkey are seeking federal recognition, which would give tribes access to health care from the federal Indian Health Services and other social services.

While each tribe has its own culture, certain health beliefs and practices have traditionally been common among Native American tribes. The spirit is as important of a component in health as the physical body. Keeping in balance with the natural world is an important part of health. Ritual practices and ceremonies are often used to purify the spirit and reduce or prevent imbalance. Such rituals may include purification through sweating, prayer, song, chanting, dancing and drumming. Herbal medicine and shamanic healing have often been used in Native American traditional approaches to healing. While some knowledge of traditional treatments and cures has been lost over time, some efforts are now being made among tribes to collect and preserve remaining knowledge.

Nationally, the federal Indian Health Service (IHS) provides health care to members of over 560 federally recognized tribes. One in 5 people who identify themselves as Native Americans in the U.S. receives IHS care. The health care comes from a variety of sources, including HIS clinics and hospitals on tribal lands and private contractors. Efforts are made to provide culturally acceptable care while employing a predominantly biomedical perspective.

Little information is available on the frequency of specific health conditions among Virginia's Native American population. Nationwide, certain conditions are known to hit Native American populations particularly hard. They include type 2 (adult onset) diabetes, heart disease, stroke, cancer, accidental injuries (often related to not wearing seat belts or drunk driving), chronic liver disease and cirrhosis (brought on by alcoholism), chronic lower respiratory diseases, and suicide. In some tribes the diabetes rate runs as high as 50% among adults. Infant mortality and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome rates run higher among Native Americans than other ethnic groups in the United States.

Adult learners from Virginian tribes may find information on any of the conditions listed above useful. Also, discussion in class on blending or reconciling traditional beliefs and practices with biomedical information and treatment ideas might be interesting and useful to learners. As the possibility of Virginia reservations receiving IHS services continues to be discussed, learners may be interested in learning about political decision-making relating to public health care in the U.S., how one might advocate for a certain political decision, and how one can educate others (including care providers) about one's cultural health beliefs in a federal public health setting.

Sources

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