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HEALING WITH MORE THAN MEDICINE

Health care providers broaden patient care to ease the mind and spirit, with a smudge room for Native Americans, meditation and more

Byline: Jonnie Taté Walker

When Darryl Knight Schafer thinks back on that day 30 years ago, he remembers the hand drum first. He remembers how it pulsed and thrummed like a heartbeat strong and steady each time his drumstick hit the stretched hide.

Then he remembers the sound of the drumbeat growing louder, reverberating off the walls of the room. He remembers feeling the room itself vibrate and shake like it was being drummed on, too. And he remembers three warriors coming to him, telling him his path was a good one, and it would lead him on a lifelong journey to help others.

Today, the vision plays out daily for Knight Schafer, particularly now that he's settling into a new position at Sanford One Care as a cultural diversity liaison, which he describes as a bridge assisting clinic staff in providing culturally mindful care to patients, as well as engaging patients in holistic personal care.

Sanford One Care is a clinical initiative under Sanford Health funded by a three-year, \$12 million grant awarded by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, according to Dan Heinemann, a chief medical officer at Sanford Health and one of the principal investigators for the Sanford One Care award and grant. The work Knight Schafer does is part of that initiative.

"Healing for American Indians is a physical and spiritual and mental journey," Knight Schafer says. "That's not far outside the scope of what health care is about; however, it's a different type of logic for Natives, and sometimes there's a gap in understanding cultural logic, especially how culture is internalized and/or expressed."

Sanford Health isn't the only provider expanding therapy options beyond the scope of Western medicine, which many health providers view as a treatment typically for symptoms, not causes.

Avera Medical Group, South Dakota Urban Indian Health and Falls Community Health each highlight an aspect of holistic and cultural care.

Although these health care facilities and others point to missions with explicit statements of serving and healing patients regardless of culture, ethnicity or religious beliefs, unique elements of alternative medicine exist at several area facilities in what many consider a growing movement to provide holistic - rather than symptom-specific - care.

Role of smudge room

It was with this line of thinking that Sanford Health's main campus incorporated a space about a year ago specifically for cultures and religions needing to burn herbs or incense. In the past, when a Native American patient, for instance, wanted to smudge - or burn - sage, sweetgrass or cedar, or smoke a tobacco-filled pipe for healing and prayer purposes, he or she was forced to do so outside or not at all because of the hospital's fire code.

Now patients can go to a large, first-floor kitchen that features an oven range hood to vent smoke produced by smudging or incense and also a small, tiled medicine wheel design laid into the floor. For tribal people of South Dakota, the medicine wheel is a powerful spiritual and cultural symbol.

Alongside developing culturally competent curriculum and training materials for clinic staff, which includes educating staff on the meaning and importance of smudging as a healing agent, Knight Schafer also prays in the smudge room with Native American patients and families who request it.

Knight Schafer, 55, is an enrolled member of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation, also known as the Three Affiliated Tribes, in North Dakota. He is quick to point out that he was not hired to be a traditional healer, or medicine man.

"Part of my role is to have conversations with providers so that relatives utilizing the clinics are getting the best representation from the health care staff using a cultural perspective," Knight Schafer says. "It's my job to make sure relatives are being treated like they want to be treated, not how I think they should be treated."

Knight Schafer's purpose

Much of the past 20 years has seen Knight Schafer offering Native American youths and families culturally specific curriculum, activities and treatment at various nonprofit agencies throughout southeastern South Dakota. A lot of that time also was spent advising and training staff at various state and local institutions regarding Native American culture.

Before joining Sanford earlier this year, Knight Schafer - who is studying for a Ph.D. in addiction psychology through Capella University - served as a chemical dependency counselor at Glory House, cultural coordinator at Volunteers of America, Dakotas, a prevention specialist for the Flandreau Santee Sioux Tribal Counseling Center, a cultural adviser for McCrossan Boys Ranch and a counseling technician for Flandreau Indian School.

Now he's a sort of customer service hotline for Sanford's medical team and their Native American patients in a role that has taken on new depths and shape in the past several months.

"We're in a capacity-building mode right now, developing curriculum and educational materials to help support providers and staff with diverse perspectives and empower them with cultural mindfulness," Knight Schafer says. "They already do good things, medically speaking. We're just asking them to elevate what they're already doing with a Native perspective."

Although the cultural diversity liaison works across the cultural and ethnic spectrum, Knight Schafer says his current priority is Native American patients, whom he refers to as "relatives." That focus is because Native Americans in this region of the country suffer much higher rates of chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, compared with other ethnicities.

In addition to these chronic ailments, Native Americans also have much higher rates of mental health issues and addiction, which often occur together. Knight Schafer calls this a "triple threat," and modern medicine is attempting to change its treatment approach to address all three issues at once, as well as focus on prevention.

"A major objective for me is to engage the community in the care of their own health, because a lot of these chronic diseases impact the entire family for generations," Knight Schafer says, explaining that he's working with families as well as human service agencies to develop community resources, including a network of traditional healers patients can contact if they want treatment outside Western therapies.

A diabetic himself who uses a combination of both Western medicine and cultural/spiritual therapies, such as inipi - or sweat lodge - ceremony, Knight Schafer is uniquely suited to the liaison role, mostly because he sees long-term benefits for the entire community.

"I do the kind of work that I do because of my grandchildren," Knight Schafer says. "The outcomes we meet here are for them and all people. My hope is it will bring balance between our (Native American) traditions and Western medicine, because it's all interconnected."

Reducing stress

Offering the smudge room and a liaison who not only understands Native American culture and spirituality but is Native American himself are welcomed and needed changes, says the Rev. Cindy Hoy, director of spiritual care at Sanford Health.

"It takes a long time to change the internal culture of a place like a hospital," says Hoy, who has been with Sanford for about 10 years. "It may feel to some people that our focus on Native Americans is pretty strong, but you have to understand the history of this area and that we're in a state that serves many Native American people who want and need this kind of care. This kind of change is exciting to me."

Hoy points out that accommodations are also made for patients of other cultures and religions, including Muslims and Hutterites. As a longtime member of Sanford's diversity council, Hoy thinks offering all patients who want spiritual care is important to holistic wellness.

"It's clinically proven that when anxiety or stress levels are lessened in an individual, when they are in a more relaxed state of peace - which is what prayer often does for people - they are allowed to heal more effectively," Hoy says.

This focus on holistic healing also motivated Avera's decision to offer integrative medicine, which was implemented about two years ago and continues to expand.

"With integrative medicine, the crux is taking a step back to see the whole picture," says Dr. Dawn Flickema, 45, who splits her time between practicing family medicine and integrative medicine at Avera.

According to the integrative medicine page on the Avera website, 70 percent of today's patients use some sort of holistic or complementary therapy beyond their normal treatment plans. Just this month, Avera hired a second full-time doctor of integrative medicine because of increased demand and is renovating the Prairie Center to accommodate two new rooms - for a total of six - within the department.

"Let's say you have a person with gastrointestinal disorders but maybe also has anxiety and stress. Rather than just treating the stomach issues, integrative medicine looks at treating the whole person," Flickema says. "The goal is to improve all areas. Anxiety, stress, even lack of sleep make any kind of chronic disorder

worse. Integrative medicine addresses that."

At Avera, complementary and holistic healing methods also include therapeutic massage, nutrition and herbal supplements, meditation rooms and a meditative labyrinth outside the Prairie Center, an area that was blessed about a year ago in a Native American prayer ceremony and features rock rarely seen outside of the Crazy Horse Monument in western South Dakota.

Clinics' efforts

Total wellness is something the Urban Indian Health clinic in northern Sioux Falls has been offering patients for the past several years. In fact, the clinic recently received accreditation from the Accreditation Association for Ambulatory Health Care as a patient-centered medical home, one of the highest honors for primary care providers. SDUIH was one of just 156 clinics in the country to receive accreditation.

"I've always said I wanted a high-quality clinic Indian people felt proud of, a place they didn't feel was a step down or a secondary clinic," says Donna Keeler, executive director of SDUIH, who attributes part of her clinic's success to the cultural and spiritual care options offered to patients.

Drivers along West Avenue near Madison Street can't miss the tipi standing tall and proud behind the clinic. Other healing methods, such as the spirit and soup gardens, are less visible.

Four years ago, as part of a suicide prevention grant, SDUIH created a spirit garden where people go to meditate, pray, hold counseling sessions or do therapy. The spirit garden is a circle of four equal parts that this year features chokecherries and other edibles.

Downtown, one of the focuses at Falls Community Health is ensuring that the city's foreign-born new arrivals understand the full spectrum of what it means to lead a healthy lifestyle in America.

In addition to employing several translators, FCH Clinical Services Manager Judy Kendall says a partnership developed with Lutheran Social Services in 2001 provides all new arrivals with health screenings, during which issues such as preventative care are discussed, in addition to walking patients through ailments they might not know they have, or might know they have but have never treated.

According to the Sioux Falls Multi-Cultural Center, more than 125 languages and dialects are spoken within the city. Kendall says Falls Community Health works with 450 to 480 new arrivals each year; in the past year and a half, a majority of the new arrivals are people from Bhutan in South Asia.

"We feel it's important for them to understand our health system because it's so vastly different from where they come from," Kendall explains. "We walk them through things like private insurance and Medicaid, and we impress upon them the things they need to know about health and prevention."

Native American faces

Deborah Tobacco understands the importance of having one's culture represented in a medical care setting. Tobacco, 43, is the project site manager for the Safe Passage Study in Pine Ridge. The study is part of a global effort by Sanford Research to improve pregnancy outcomes for Native American women and babies.

"One of the most important things I feel working in Pine Ridge is that I live here, and I'm from here, and that means I already have a natural connection to many of these women, because I'm aware of the challenges they face, their hardships and their opportunities," says Tobacco, an enrolled member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, in

a telephone interview from her office in Pine Ridge.

As a community member, Tobacco can appreciate how it feels to see Native Americans on a health care staff.

"It just allows you to be more open. It takes down those walls, those barriers and makes you a lot more comfortable," she says. "It allows you to connect."

And that's exactly what Sanford is looking for in its cultural diversity liaison, Heinemann says.

"A lot of this is trying to meet the patient where they are in their journey through their chronic disease or illness," he says. "We have been very good just assuming patients were walking with us, that they understood or were willing or could participate in their care."

Hiring Knight Schafer was Sanford's way of recognizing its providers could do better, Heinemann said. No one expects Sanford's care teams to become cultural experts, but awareness is key.

"Now we know that if a patient is not engaged or isn't an active partner in their own care, then anything we provide medically isn't going to be as effective as it would be with the patient fully engaged," Heinemann says.

"Sometimes cultural barriers get in the way of providing effective medical care, and if I'm aware of what those barriers are and have resources to overcome them, it's going to be better for the patient."

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View a photo gallery and video about spiritual and cultural healing.

Inside

Find examples of how a cultural diversity liaison can offer help to patients and health care providers.

What's offered

Sanford Health: A new cultural diversity liaison, one of several hired regionally throughout the Sanford system, works to both educate and inform medical staff of cultural practices and differences, particularly among Native American patients. In addition, the liaison assists Native American patients in caring for themselves physically, culturally and spiritually, through direct service and resource referrals. A new space on Sanford's main campus accommodates smudging or smoking spiritual tobacco for prayer. For more information, email Darryl Knight Schafer at darryl.schafer@sanfordhealth.org.

Avera Medical Group: Integrative medicine complements traditional medical treatment and focuses on healing body, mind and spirit. Services include acupuncture, aromatherapy, meditation rooms, therapeutic massage, nutrition services, mind-body classes, guided imagery and a spiritual labyrinth. For more information, visit www.avera.org/cancer-institute/integrative-medicine.

[avera.org/cancer-institute/](http://www.avera.org/cancer-institute/)

[integrative-medicine](http://www.avera.org/cancer-institute/integrative-medicine).

Falls Community Health: Provides a host of services for patients new to the United States. In partnership with

Lutheran Social Services, new arrivals are given health screenings, in which issues such as preventative care are discussed, in addition to walking patients through ailments they have. This partnership also guides patients through health and legal systems, banking, public school and all aspects of their new lives. For more information, visit www.sioax falls.org/health/falls-community-health.aspx.

South Dakota Urban Indian Health: The past few years have seen unique additions to SDUIH's patient offerings. The spirit garden, including a tipi, is a place for reflection and therapy for patients wanting to take advantage of the garden's medicine wheel design. The land surrounding the building is landscaped with buffalo grass, found naturally on the South Dakota prairie. A soup garden flourishes in old whiskey barrels to teach patients lacking yard space how to grow healthy vegetables in small spaces. For more information, visit www.sduih.org.

Examples of bridging culture gaps

Darryl Knight Schafer assists both patients and providers in his role as the new cultural diversity liaison at Sanford One Care. Below are examples of interactions Knight Schafer has had.

Example 1:

A Native American patient asks to hold a small, colorful bundle - what he calls a tobacco tie - during a surgical procedure. The patient also asks to burn the bundle after the surgery. His request is denied.

To help in this scenario, Knight Schafer would work with the patient to help the medical care team understand the significance of the tobacco tie. "It has been blessed and given to him by a family member/traditional healer or medicine man," Knight Schafer would explain. "It represents a prayer for healing and recovery. Denying his request of holding the tobacco tie will have a negative impact on this patient's concepts of healing and recovery." With this new understanding, the care team would allow the bundle to be present during surgery, and the patient or a family member would be able to burn the bundle in Sanford Health's smudge room.

Example 2:

A Native American patient is examined by a doctor who notes what appear to be several puncture-like scars on the patient's chest. The doctor assumes these are self-inflicted and that the patient might have a mental health disorder. The response of the doctor elicits a reaction from the patient that closes the conversation down and results in the patient no longer wanting to be seen by the doctor.

Here, Knight Schafer would educate the doctor about the sundance, which is a spiritual ceremony that includes dancers piercing themselves on the chest (male) or upper arms (female). Knight Schafer would describe the ceremony as healthy, normal and spiritually significant behavior.

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A medicine wheel symbol is inlaid in the floor of a smudge room at Sanford USD Medical Center.

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