



# News From The EpiCenter

Northwest Tribal Epidemiology Center - Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board

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## Northwest Regional Native American Infant Mortality Project: Gaining Greater Understanding

### Infant Mortality in the Northwest

Infant mortality is a key marker for the health of populations around the world. In recent years, the United States has experienced reductions in infant mortality. However, specific ethnic and racial groups, such as American Indians and Alaskan Natives (AI/AN), have not enjoyed the benefits of this decline in infant mortality.

Several years ago, Dee Robertson, MD, MEH, Director of the Northwest Tribal Epidemiology Center (*The EpiCenter*) at the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board (NPAIHB), and colleagues from the Idaho, Oregon, and Washington state departments of health set out to determine the rate of infant mortality among tribes in the Northwest. In the March 12, 1999, edition of the *Mortality and Morbidity Weekly Report* published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), they reported good news for Northwest tribes. With data provided by the three state departments of health, the authors examined cause-specific infant mortality rate trends for births to AI/AN mothers and found that overall rates decreased from 20.0 per 1000 live-born infants during the combined years of 1985-1988 to 7.7 during 1993-1996. Deaths attributed to sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS), one of the leading causes of deaths for infants, also decreased for Northwest AI/AN from 8.9 to 3.0 per 1000. In fact, SIDS rate reductions accounted for 48% of the decline among Northwest AI/AN. Infant mortality and SIDS rates also decreased for non-AI/AN infants with infant mortality rates dropping from 9.6 per 1000 during 1985-1988 to 6.3 during 1993-1996 and SIDS rates decreasing from 2.5 to 1.4. Despite these observations, one must be cautious in interpreting the degree of the reduction since these annual rates can fluctuate as a result of the relatively small numbers of AI/AN deaths.

To our knowledge, a dramatic drop like this has not

occurred in other areas in Indian Country.

These findings have come during a time when the federal government has formally designated its initiatives to increase support for activities to better understand and eliminate racial health disparities. One of the special emphasis areas is infant mortality.

### The EpiCenter Achieves a First!

The CDC publication raised a number of questions, including:

- Why did this improvement occur?
- Are rates for Northwest AI/AN continuing to decline?
- What can we learn to improve our prevention strategies?
- Which groups of infants have a better chance to survive?
- Which groups of infants are at risk?

To help address these and other questions, NPAIHB requested support from CDC to further investigate infant mortality among Northwest AI/AN. This November, Jim Gaudino, MD, MS, MPH, from the CDC Division of Reproductive Health, Pregnancy, and Infant Health Branch joined *The EpiCenter* to assist NPAIHB in follow-up work. This represents the first time CDC has assigned a senior staff person directly to a tribal organization.

Dr. Gaudino was one of the authors of the CDC publication, and he brings much experience as a maternal and child health epidemiologist. "It is exciting for me to work directly with the tribes now on their efforts to reduce infant mortality among Northwest tribes," stated Dr. Gaudino. He will lead the Northwest Regional Native American Infant Mortality Project, which will focus on: (1) developing a clearer understanding of the factors involved in the recently reported reduction in infant mortality among Northwest AI/AN, and (2) examining more current infant mortality trends.

The infant mortality project will begin to address the above questions in several phases. Phase 1 will include a re-

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