

NEWS FROM The EpiCenter

Northwest Tribal Epidemiology Center

Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board

June-August 2001

This Issue's Feature Project

Northwest Tribal Health Research Center

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National Indian Research Center Finds Home in the Northwest

People who work in Indian health programs are well aware of the need to eliminate racial health disparities, create partnerships between minority organizations and research institutions, and establish career development opportunities for minorities. These needs are driving the creation of several initiatives, including the Department of Health and Human Services' *Initiative to Eliminate Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities* and the National Institute of General Medical Sciences' *Strategic Plan for Reducing Health Disparities*. The initiatives are serving as a catalyst for the establishment of a new initiative, called the Native American Research Centers for Health (NARCH), which is a partnership between Indian Health Service (IHS) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

IHS and NIH Announce the NARCH Initiative

In August 2000 IHS and NIH formally announced the NARCH initiative to support partnerships between American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) tribes or organizations and academic institutions that conduct intensive biomedical, clinical, or behavioral research. By forming these strategic partnerships, each NARCH will aim to accomplish the following goals: (1) develop research projects linked to reducing health disparities for AI/AN; (2) develop a cadre of AI/AN scientists and health professionals; and (3) reduce distrust by AI/AN communities and people toward health research. So, what makes the NARCH initiative different from other initiatives? IHS and NIH hope to establish between three and five research centers that would be located in and administered by tribes and tribal organizations not the academic institutions.

NPAIHB Applies for NARCH

The Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board (NPAIHB), along with its academic partners Oregon

Health Sciences University and the University of Washington School of Medicine, submitted its application for the NARCH grant in December 2000. In its application, NPAIHB proposed to establish the Northwest Tribal Health Research Center (NIHRC), which would be housed at NPAIHB and administered by *The EpiCenter*.

Word from NIH

In March 2000 IHS notified *The EpiCenter* that our plan to establish NIHRC, our two major projects, and two of our pilot projects were ranked in the "top echelon" by NIH (see


"The proposed NIHRC will function as a regional resource from its inception. It also has the potential and capacity to function as a national resource."

-NIH Scientific Review Administrator

related articles, pages 3 and 4). Last month NIH provided *The EpiCenter* with the comments from the reviewers of our proposal. Overall, NIH was enthusiastic about our proposal stating, "The reviewers unanimously agreed that this comprehensive and well written application provides compelling proof of the involvement of the American Indian and Alaska Native community, not only by the community-based projects that are proposed, but by the list of competent researchers, many of whom are members of

Native American tribes themselves. The reviewers unanimously recommended this application with a high level of enthusiasm." We expect to receive funding to support NIHRC and its projects by October 2001, but we have not received official word from IHS about the amount of funding that will be distributed.

Looking Toward the Future

The EpiCenter is excited about the possibility of establishing this new research center to serve the Northwest tribes. We will continue to provide updates on our application in future issues of *News from The EpiCenter*. For further information on NIHRC, please contact *The EpiCenter* at (503) 228-4185. 

Projects of The EpiCenter

It has been a long time since we have updated you on the projects of *The EpiCenter*—since December 1999 in fact! Since then, projects have been added, projects have merged, and new staff have joined the team. The following is a list of current *EpiCenter* projects that includes project goals and staff.

Northwest Tribal Epidemiology Center

- Provide accurate and timely health information to Northwest tribes on their health status
- Provide advocacy and technical assistance for Northwest tribes to achieve the health status objectives of the Indian Health Care Amendments

Project Staff:

Mary Brickell (Grand Ronde), RWMS Support Specialist
Anthia Nickerson, BA, Technical Writer & Research Analyst
Dee Robertson, MD, MPH, Director
Chandra Wilson (Klamath), Project Assistant

Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Surveillance Project

- Assess the current number of people with fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) among the Northwest tribes
- Reduce the level of FAS through effective programs

Project Staff:

Kathryn Alexander (Tuscarora Mohawk), Project Assistant
Carolyn Hartness, BA, FAS Contractor
Suzie Kuerschner, BA, FAS Contractor

Indian Community Health Profile Project

- Provide Indian communities with a feasible method of assessing their overall health status and monitoring that health status over time

Project Staff:

Tam Lutz (Lummi), MHA, MPH, Project Specialist
Paul Stehr-Green, DrPH, MPH, Consulting Epidemiologist

Northwest Tribal Dental Support Center

- Provide clinical and preventive program support
- Design and implement an area-wide surveillance system
- Measure progress toward achieving the Oral Health Objectives of Health People 2010

Project Staff:

Kathryn Alexander (Tuscarora Mohawk), Project Assistant
Bonnie Bruerd, DrPH, MPH, Prevention Support Contractor
Jeff Hagen, DDS, MPH, Clinical Support Contractor
Kathy Phipps, DrPH, Oral Health Surveillance Contractor
Dee Robertson, MD, MPH, Acting Project Director
James Toothaker, DDS, MPH, Research Support Contractor

Northwest Tribal Infant Mortality Project

- Develop a clearer understanding of the factors involved in the recently reported reduction in infant mortality among Northwest AI/AN
- Examine more current infant mortality trends

Project Staff:

Jim Gaudino, MD, MS, MPH, Maternal and Child Health Medical Epidemiologist

Northwest Tribal Registry Project

- Determine the extent of American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) racial misclassification
- Improve the understanding of AI/AN morbidity and mortality in smaller communities
- Provide a valid way of measuring racial health disparities

Project Staff:

Tom Becker, MD, PhD, Consulting Epidemiologist
Kurt Schweigman (Oglala Lakota), MPH, Registry Manager

Stop Chlamydia! Project

- Obtain comprehensive information about chlamydia infection within Northwest AI/AN communities
- Provide technical assistance to support tribal sexually transmitted disease prevention efforts

Project Staff:

Shawn Jackson (Klamath), BS, Project Specialist

Western Tribal Diabetes Project

- Support Northwest and California diabetes programs with their existing special diabetes grants
- Assist Northwest and California tribes in developing applications for the expanded Special Diabetes Funds projects

Project Staff:

Sharon Fleming (Choctaw of Oklahoma), AAS, Project Assistant
Kelly Gonzales (Cherokee), MPH, Project Director
Ed Lutz (Lummi), Information Systems Specialist
Tim O'Hearn, MPH, Project Coordinator
James Oliver (Lummi), RD, Northwest Project Specialist
Jennifer Olson, MS, Southern California Project Specialist
Glenna Starrit (Hoopa), RD, Central California Regional Specialist
Steve Viramontes, PHN, Northern California Regional Specialist

For Further Information

If you would like further information on *The EpiCenter* projects and activities, feel free to contact project staff at (503) 228-4185.

What Is Fellowship?

According to the American Heritage College Dictionary, fellowship is either a close association of friends or of equals sharing similar interests or a financial grant made to a fellow in a college or university. The Northwest Tribal Health Research Center (NIHRC; see page 1) can fulfill both definitions of the word through its American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) Fellowship Program. NIHRC is looking for AI/AN undergraduate, graduate, and post-doctoral students who are interested in a fellowship position at Oregon Health Sciences University or the University of Washington. The fellowships are expected to begin in October 2001.

What Experience Will an NTHRC Fellowship Offer?

That's up to you.

NIHRC has a short list of requirements for its fellows, but a long list of innovative and flexible tools that you can use to tailor your fellowship experience.

First, the requirements.

Each fellow will spend two years at one of the two premier medical and public health research institutions of the Pacific Northwest: Oregon Health Sciences University in Portland, Oregon, or the University of Washington in Seattle, Washington. Although you will choose one school as your "home base," you will attend frequent seminars and workshops at the other school. These seminars will be developed to help foster your research skills. At your home base, you will work with your mentor on a project in biomedical, clinical, behavioral, or population-based research.

Second, the options.

You will have the freedom to tailor your fellowship experience to your experiences, career plans, and research interests. NIHRC has obtained the commitment of a number of potential mentors at NPAIHB, Oregon Health Sciences University, and the University of Washington who are AI/AN or who have extensive experience in working with tribal communities. Areas of expertise for some of our mentors include diabetes and nutritional epidemiology, mental health issues, cardiovascular disease, injury prevention, and Indian youth suicide prevention. Want to focus your research on cancer epidemiology? NIHRC can match you with a mentor who specializes in that field. Need to focus on statistics? You will be able to take courses in fields that interest you or in fields that need improvement. Want to attend a summer epidemiology institute? As an NIHRC Fellow, NIHRC will be able to provide you with this type of experience to help further your career in research.

You have the flexibility to decide.

For further information on the NIHRC American Indian and Alaskan Native Fellowship Program, please contact *The EpiCenter* at (503) 228-4185.



Northwest Tribal Epidemiology Center Projects and Activities

Community Health Training

Northwest Tribal Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Project

Health Status Objectives

Indian Community Health Profile Project

Northwest Tribal Infant Mortality Project

Northwest REMS Cancer Assessment Project

Northwest Tribal Dental Support Center

Northwest Tribal Registry Project

REMS Support and Training

REMS Surveillance Capacity Project

Stop Chlamydia! Project

Western Tribal Diabetes Project


Community-Based Projects Lead NARCH Efforts

In its Native American Research Centers for Health (NARCH) application, the Northwest Portland Area Indian Health Board (NPAIHB) worked closely with a specially-formed Scientific and Community Advisory Council to develop research proposals that would address the goals of the NARCH initiative (see page 1). The result was an application to establish the Northwest Tribal Health Research Center that would oversee a full research project, an AI/AN training project, and five pilot projects (each with a shorter scope and smaller budget than the full research project). In addition to addressing the NARCH goals, each project proposal focused on areas of concern for Northwest AI/AN communities and included at least one AI/AN trainee to act as a Principal Investigator or Co-Principal Investigator.

The full research project titled, "Community Intervention to Reduce Childhood Obesity and Caries in Northwest AI/AN," was the centerpiece of the NARCH application. This four-year research project will test whether community- and family-based interventions can alter patterns of sugared beverage consumption in Northwest Indian communities, and whether such behavior can reduce the incidence of early childhood caries and

childhood obesity. In its review of this project, NIH was enthusiastic stating, "This novel, well conceived, and carefully designed study not only proposes to investigate a significant problem in the AI/AN community, but it also proposes to develop culturally relevant intervention programs to replace sweetened beverages with water."

NIH also praised the AI/AN training project titled, "Improving Health Research Skills for AI/AN." One of the reviewers stated, "This is an excellent example of a very comprehensive and worthwhile training program. One gets the impression that this is a dynamic program that will certainly benefit the trainees very well." The training project aims to increase the number of well-trained AI/AN researchers who are capable of conducting biomedical, behavioral, and population-based research in diverse settings (see page 3).

In addition, NIH selected two pilot projects as promising: (1) an injury prevention project to assess barriers to the use of child safety seats in Northwest reservations; and (2) a project to introduce evidence-based medicine to a Northwest tribal health clinic. Future News from the EpiCenter issues will update you on the final funding decisions. 

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