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# Indian Health Service Oklahoma Elders' Conference Outstanding Elders Awards Banquet

“Initiatives in Elder Care”

by

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7 – 7:15 p.m.

Good afternoon. It is a real pleasure to be today, back home in the great state of Oklahoma!

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this conference, and for the honor of being among so many distinguished elders. I also appreciate the opportunity to share some information on the goals and progress of the Indian health system in providing for the health care needs of American Indian and Alaska Native elders across the nation.

The role of elders in our communities has always been an important one -- your wisdom and strength are invaluable assets to our families and our communities. Our elders help maintain the traditions and structure that keep families physically and mentally healthy.

We need our elders with us, healthy and vital, for their sake and for ours. This is why the IHS is committed to supporting Tribes and Urban Indian Health programs as they develop services that elders and their families need for their elders to remain in the communities. Tribes are showing strong leadership and innovation in the development of long-term care services that help elders remain as much as possible with their families and communities, in the traditional way.

It is both true and at the same time highly misleading to say, as many have, that historically there has not been access to long-term care in Indian Country. It is true because, until recently, the infrastructure for formal long-term care was very much undeveloped, and access to formal programs and services was quite limited. But it is not true because, as I'm sure you know, there has always been long-term care in Indian Country. Families and relations have always cared for frail elders and supported them in activities of daily living, and in many

*The text is the basis of Dr. Grim's oral remarks at the OK Elders' Conference on Sept.8, 2005. It should be used with the understanding that some material may have been added or omitted during presentation.*

Tribes there were and still are clear clan and family roles in the care of the elderly. In other words, there was a traditional form of long-term care, based in extended family and clan relationships. This is an important point, because I am convinced that, in that traditional model of long-term care, there is a lot of wisdom and understanding about what elders need to be healthy and supported in frailty. Quite frankly, this is wisdom and understanding that we don't always find in our modern versions of long-term care.

The “mainstream” model of long-term care, with its reliance on institutional settings and professional care, and emphasis on segregation of the elder with dementia or other disabilities, may not be the best model for Indian Country. I have seen, and expect to see more, approaches in long-term care which draw from and support traditional Tribal values, priorities, and practices. Knowledge and stories about how elders have been cared for in generations past can point the way to a better future. Our goal in the IHS is to work with the Tribes in developing a long-term care model that supports elders and their families with medical, personal, and social services delivered in a variety of settings to ensure quality of life, maximum independence, and personal dignity.

Our three main IHS health initiatives —Behavioral Health, Health Promotion and Disease Prevention, and Chronic Disease Management —provide a useful framework for how we can develop the Indian health system to better meet the needs of our elders, now and in the future. Through Tribal consultation, self-governance, and self-determination processes, the IHS and Tribes have worked together to identify these focus areas for Indian health. The IHS and Tribes continue to working closely together on these initiatives to help achieve significant improvements in health that are critical to the future of Indian communities.

The **Behavioral Health Initiative** involves addressing mental health and related behavioral health issues, such as depression and its consequences, resulting in stronger families and healthier communities. It has become obvious to all of us in the Indian health system that addressing these issues in our communities is crucial, and that we need to increase our focus on screening and primary prevention in mental health.

Elders play a vital role in providing a sense of structure and cultural identity that helps keep our families and communities emotionally and mentally healthy. When we remove the elder from the family and community, we weaken the fabric that holds the family and community together. We remove their wisdom, we remove an important bridge to our past and our heritage; and perhaps most importantly, we remove their immense love and devotion to their families. And this weakens our people, especially our youth, who so desperately need the anchor and support of strong families and communities as they deal with issues of cultural identity, rural isolation, racism, poverty, lack of equal opportunity, and other issues that in combination can be emotionally devastating— as we have seen tragically illustrated at Red Lake. It is therefore essential that we develop the services to support elders so they can remain with their families and communities.

Keeping our elders near their families also supports their own mental and emotional health, resulting in longer and happier lives. And, in an interrelated way, healthy families are able to provide a safer, more supportive environment for elder care. Through the Behavioral Health Initiative, the IHS will work with Tribes to promote the mental and spiritual health of individuals, families, and communities, including a model of elder care that will help us keep our elders with us and safe in a life of connection and meaning to the very end.

The Director's **Health Promotion and Disease Prevention Initiative** is aimed at supporting community-based efforts to improve wellness and fitness and prevent chronic disease, especially diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Healthy aging is contingent upon health in youth and middle years. The best care we can provide to an elder cannot undo a lifetime of unhealthy habits. The efforts underway in our communities to prevent and treat diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and tobacco and substance abuse will have profound implications for the health of the elders of the future.

But a healthy lifestyle also has huge benefits for the current elderly. Exercise has been shown to reduce arthritis pain, improve sleep, reduce rates of fall and injury, and reduce the risk of dementia. Exercise and fitness are powerful medicine for the elderly.

As elders, you also have a leadership role to play in promoting health and fitness in the community. I believe we are at a critical moment in Indian Country. You who are elders now may remember what it was like before diabetes. You know your own parents and grandparents as wiry, fit, and, yes, sometimes hungry people who worked hard from sun up to sun down to keep their families fed and clothed; who knew the prayers to say to keep on the right path. We need you to share that with the young people in our communities. Our elders know chronic disease, but they also know wellness, and you can bring that knowledge of wellness forward for the next generations.

The Director's **Chronic Disease Initiative** is aimed at using innovative and state-of-the-art approaches to helping individuals manage chronic disease and minimize its impact on their health and function. Optimal management of diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease and other chronic diseases can minimize the effect of chronic disease on health and function. We have to do better to help our elders care for themselves, so they can remain strong and healthy.

I would like to say to all our elders, those here today and throughout Indian Country-- I ask for your help. Advise us on how to develop the best possible health care system for the elderly. And help us by attending to your own individual health; keep your minds, bodies, and spirits in harmony by taking care of yourselves, physically and mentally. Eating healthy, staying as active as you can, helping others, taking up new hobbies or activities to enrich the spirit and strengthen your minds, all of these are important in maintaining balance and harmony in our lives.

We want you with us, healthy and active, for as long as possible. We need you. Your children need you. Your grandchildren need you. Your people need you— now more than ever.

Thank you.