

Friday, February 16, 2001

Modern medicine can learn from Navajo, surgeon says
Balance of mind, body and spirit are central to wellness

By: ELAINE JARVIK, 'Deseret News' staff writer

Her people have never called it "psychoneuroimmunology" or "systems thinking" or even "support group therapy." But intuitively, Lori Arviso Alvord says, Navajos have long known what Western medicine is only recently figuring out: that our mind and spirit affect our bodies.

Western medicine, she says, can learn a lot from what she calls "ceremony medicine," and the philosophies underlying it.

Alvord, known as "the first Navajo woman surgeon," is an assistant professor of surgery at Dartmouth Medical School and associate dean of student and minority affairs. "Our native people's ceremonies have validity in terms of healing that no one has investigated," she told a room full of doctors and nurses at surgery ground rounds at the University of Utah Medical School Wednesday.

While she's not necessarily prescribing Night Chant ceremonies for patients about to go under the knife, she does think that many elements of healing ceremonies, and the Navajo concept of Walking in Beauty that they embrace, should be a part of the modern hospital.

The perfect hospital, she said, would be an environment of calmness and serenity. Patient comfort would be emphasized. Efforts would be made to decrease patient anxiety, since stress negatively affects the immune system. A perfect hospital would encourage family and other support systems, she says.

And it wouldn't smell like a hospital, either, she said. It would smell like chilies, maybe. It would be filled with light, provide "generous and comfortable seating" for relatives, and would include porches and gardens and even ceremonial space, because beauty relaxes the body and therefore strengthens the immune system. The patient would feel that everyone he encountered is committed to his comfort and healing.

"Spas do a better job of this than we do," Alvord told the doctors and nurses.

Finally ("the controversial part," Alvord said with a smile), medical interns and residents would not be trained under "the model of masochism" most American hospitals favor. Sleep deprivation doesn't help anyone have a balanced life, she explained.

"Mistakes occur when the staff is stressed by fatigue, anger, anxiety and low morale," said Alvord, who has detailed her feelings about Navajo and Western medicine in her book "The Scalpel and the Silver Bear."

A balanced life "a balance of body, mind and spirit" is central to wellness, according to Navajo belief. Western medicine has only lately begun to believe this, and to employ Navajo ceremonial techniques such as meditation, guided imagery and "group support."

Alvord grew up in Crown Point, N.M., the daughter of a Navajo father and a white mother. She attended Dartmouth and Stanford Medical School. It was while she was in her surgical residency at Stanford, and later while she practiced in Gallup, that she began to appreciate the traditional medicine she had left behind.

Modern medicine, although of course helpful in so many ways, is often a lonely ordeal for patients. During a Navajo healing ceremony, on the other hand, a whole community will gather to help a person heal. "Ceremonies are entirely about social support," Alvord said. "Disease is a frightening thing. The last thing we need is to be alone."

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