

A FAMILY PHYSICIAN TAKES AN ALTERNATIVE PATH

By Tracey Thomas

Out in “Custer Country,” **Cmdr. George Ceremuga, D.O. ('93)**, plays an active role in the Indian Health Services’ commitment to promoting healthy American Indian communities.

Every week, he makes a three-hour commute from his home in South Dakota to the pine-covered landscape of the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation in Lame Deer, Mont., where he provides medical care to Native Americans on the reservation.

“One minute I could be delivering a baby and the next I could be dealing with an alcohol-related trauma patient,” he says. “I see much more than runny noses.”

As clinical director of the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation Health Center, the ongoing struggle to stem the rampant spread of alcoholism, teen pregnancy, obesity, diabetes and drug addiction in native populations looms large in Ceremuga’s professional life. And these are only a few of the pressing social issues on the reservation.

He also works with tribal organizations to promote preventive health activities to improve the health and well-being of the reservation community.

Facing serious health problems every day can take its toll, but Ceremuga has a prescription for that.

“It’s important to separate yourself from your patients, which means not taking it personally when someone’s diabetes is getting worse because they won’t take their medicine,” he explains. “I see my role as a cheerleader for change, and if only one person makes a lifestyle change for the better, no matter how small, I’ve succeeded.”

“What I do is not glamorous, but it’s honorable,” he adds. “Sure we have problems and we’re understaffed, but we’re helping to make needed change.”

He encourages medical students to do the same, taking what they’ve learned and using it to help people with the most need. And he’s quick to point out that helping others doesn’t mean living a diminished life.

In fact, it’s quite the opposite.

For Ceremuga, it meant exchanging an 80 – 100 hour work week in private practice, for a 40 – 50 hour work week on the reservation. Shorter weeks have allowed him to spend more time with his five children and to live the active and healthy lifestyle he advocates for his patients.

“I’m constantly challenged in my work and really feel energized when I can provide patient care to those in need,” he says. “It’s the reason why I went into medicine.”



photo provided by Cmdr. George Ceremuga

TODAY'S D.O.

Don Shoulderblade, “sacred hat keeper” or holy man for the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, prays daily for the safety and security of his people. Cmdr. Ceremuga and Shoulderblade are collaborating on a plan to integrate western medicine with traditional Northern Cheyenne medicine.



photo provided by Cmdr. George Ceremuga

The Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation Health Center is a modern, ambulatory care facility staffed with five family physicians, a pediatrician and two nurse practitioners who offer outpatient care as well as 24-hour urgent care to nearly 5,000 patients. Services offered include optometry and dental care, physical and behavioral health therapy, and a full service lab and radiology unit. The clinic also includes a Healing Room for traditional ceremonies.

In partnership with the Northern Cheyenne Community, the health center staff strives to raise the physical, mental, social and spiritual health of the population to the highest level in a culturally sensitive manner.

Dr. Ceremuga is a Commander in the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps and is currently detailed to the Indian Health Service. The Commissioned Corps provides highly trained and mobile health professionals who carry out programs to promote the health of the nation, understand and prevent disease and injury, assure safe and effective drugs and medical devices, deliver health services to federal beneficiaries, and furnish health expertise in time of war or other national or international emergencies.

Cmdr. Ceremuga also participated in the Commissioned Corps relief effort immediately following Hurricane Katrina.

For more information about the Commissioned Corps please visit www.usphs.gov.