

Diabetic Disaster On the Horizon

By: Emery Real Bird (White Mountain Apache Tribe)

“Grandma, why do you poke your hand every day?” Words I remember from a crisp autumn day just before school started years ago. Only the buzz of a nearby mosquito breaks the silence as my eyes watch a silent prick of my grandmother’s hand. Quickly it turned into a strong red bead, still in silence and concentration she drops the blood on what appears to be a plastic strip and inserts it into a small device. She raises her head and smiles at me saying only, “I’m a Diabetic.” Those three words are an increasing reality for many Native families on the White Mountain Apache Reservation. A struggle between Western and Traditional Apache lifestyles has rendered many waistlines overweight in the past decade as the effect of sedentary lifestyles becomes apparent (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 1). It is this struggle that will determine the outcome of advancing waistlines and glucose meters that plague people, like my Grandmother, on the White Mountain Apache Reservation. Without the help of determined governments and people alike the question of diabetes will always remain, but with community involvement we can advance the cause for a healthy reservation.

Diabetes is a disease that originates in two major forms, Type II and I. Both have a common root within the pancreas where the ever-important hormone Insulin is produced. Insulin is essential to the breakdown of Glucose, or sugar, in the body. Type I deals with the complete or almost complete shutdown of the pancreatic beta cells, in

other words it doesn't produce any Insulin. Whereas a person with Type II Diabetes still has working pancreatic beta cells, but the body doesn't respond well to the Insulin produced (Saudek, Rubin, and Shump 18). Most Native Americans, like my Grandma, have Type II Diabetes. It is mostly found in older people over forty years and is much more common in overweight people (American Diabetes Assn.). Native Americans are more than 2.2 times likelier to contract the disease compared to other demographics (Blakely, Park, and Quarterman 11). It is in these stark facts that hide behind the face of every Apache young and old. The common anecdote, "You are what you eat" applies nicely to Natives who until recently ate healthy food from the Earth, but now depend upon factory food that is both low in nutrition and economical for the majority of impoverished Native families. Where there was once traditional mulberry drinks there is cool-aid, where there was once dry meat there is a greasy cheeseburger, and where there once was a farm there is weeds. Our Native traditions are being assaulted on all fronts by our increasingly inactive lifestyles and in the process are complicating our lives even more by introducing illnesses like diabetes to our reservation, our home.

On a hillside full of majestic Cottonwood Trees there is a building where the lines for prescriptions takes hours to get through and the quality of care goes down after the budget has been exhausted (Blakely, Park, and Quarterman 89). It is our regional Indian Health Service Hospital in Whiteriver, Arizona. I still remember walking down the cold hallways leading to the pharmacy we were here to retrieve some more diabetic medication that included blood pressure medicine and more glucose meter tabs. We were there all day, coated in the coughs of passing people, just waiting for a small bag of

medicine. It is surprising that diabetes isn't the number one threat facing Native populations; instead heart disease takes the cake. People don't know that the largest percentage of deaths from heart disease originates from diabetes (Saudek, Rubin, and Shump 298-301). Everyone in the waiting room depends on the IHS to provide free medical services guaranteed by treaty rights with the U.S. Government (Indian Country Today). A diabetic person would pay a hefty fee of \$13,234 per year for diabetic expenses. The cost of diabetes amounts to \$1.43 billion dollars per year almost 40% of the total IHS budget (Blakeley, Park, and Quarterman 10). Imagine where prevention and awareness could potentially drop that figure by millions of dollars

Prevention is where IHS and the WMAT Community Health Representative's are working towards preventing diabetes on the reservation while educating people to stay healthy. Many people like my Grandma depend on programs at IHS to keep their diabetes in check (Blakeley, Park, and Quarterman 9-11). Services rendered include fitness programs and diabetic supplements to her diet. These resources and programs are available to everyone, especially the younger generations who have seen a 54% increase in the prevalence of Type II Diabetes since 1996 (Blakeley, Park, and Quarterman 10). The children are the future of my Tribe and we must do everything to keep them healthy and smart.

Even though IHS has targeted older groups of Apache's they seem to have neglected to address the issue of our future, the children (Blakeley, Park, and Quarterman 54-62). I see no working programs that educate the masses of overweight children with a few

minor exceptions popping up from a 5k run/walk to raise awareness. This is where preventable measures can be taken with great effect on the vitality of a nation, if they concentrated their efforts at keeping one generation healthy they would have success later with future generations.

Many efforts can be done to revitalize agriculture on our reservation to provide many needy families the opportunity to grow vegetables cheaply while fostering healthy habits to curtail the prevalence of overweight people. Our heavy reliance on fast food has made us lazy and even Geronimo spoke of the importance of traditional foods and lifestyles to the Apache saying:

“He (The Creator) gave us (Apaches) such grains, fruits, and game as they need to eat... Thus it was in the beginning: the Apache and their homes, each created for each other. When they are taken from these home they sicken and die.” (Readers Digest Assn.)

Exactly why we need to revitalize traditional farming techniques and begin to plant our way to a healthy tomorrow. I have even begun to help many neighbors with fencing and prepare their backyards for a family garden during my spring break. We must not forget the teachings of our elders to prepare for a better tomorrow or all is lost for a healthy tomorrow.

Schools on the reservation can do their part in integrating a healthier menu for school lunches that could be subsidized by our tribe's coffers. It is in our tribal leaders hands to keep the people healthy. By instituting just one preventable measure they

would help the lives of thousands of people on the WMAT reservation and every children that is saved from poverty and illness through education will receive the greatest gift of all. The power to say, "I'm healthy!" and not bound to a prescription bottle. That is my dream; a healthier reservation where little kids aren't left in the dark about important health issues and the phrase, "I'm a Diabetic" isn't heard liberally tomorrow as it is today.

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