

Cancer Epidemiology in Action

A discussion with Tinka Duran, MPH, the senior director of the Great Plains Tribal Epidemiology Center.

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What is the Great Plains Tribal Epidemiology Center?

We work to address the health disparities, including cancer disparities, of the Great Plains Tribes in North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska and Iowa. Our goal is to report timely, accurate and useful data. We do that by measuring and monitoring the health status of our population. We advocate for their health-related concerns at a regional, state and national level.

How are cancer rates and outcomes different among American Indians than other groups?

American Indians have higher rates of specific cancers. In the Great Plains region, for example, we have higher rates of colorectal, breast and lung cancer. Lung cancer is one of the larger ones because we have high smoking rates in our tribal communities. We also work to provide increased education on the benefits of not smoking. Our cancer outcomes are worse. We have barriers to prevention, screening and treatment. We live in a very rural area, and our relatives may have to drive many miles to get to treatment. Delays can cause progression to Stage II cancer or even to Stage III or IV, which we know is harder to treat.

Also, there are very few palliative care services in our tribal communities. We have partnered with other organizations, like community health workers, to assess and implement palliative care to help our relatives. But again, living so far out from larger cities, it's hard to get those resources to our tribal communities.

I hear you using the word relatives. Does this mean you refer to community members as relatives?

We do. Many times when we get together and we do a prayer, we end with Mitakuye Oyasin, which means that we are all related.

How do you use data to help improve cancer rates and health outcomes?

Being able to study the trends and patterns of cancer in our tribal communities helps us develop outreach, education and evidence-based interventions to increase screening, early detection and prevention.

What programs are you involved with to help address some of these issues?

We have a Comprehensive Cancer Control Program funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It's a collaborative approach used by communities and their partners to combine, share and coordinate resources to reduce the cancer burden. Through the program, we work with stakeholders on a national, regional, state and tribal level to use data to inform and educate our coalition members, partners and policymakers. They lead the implementation of strategies to increase cancer prevention, screening and support for cancer survivors, families, caregivers, health providers and our relatives.

What inspires you in your work?

I'm from the community, Sicangu Lakota, an enrolled member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. Helping my people, which is all people, because we're all related—that's where my passion comes from. It comes from the community.

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