

**HEALING BEYOND THE WESTERN LENS:
EMBRACING NATIVE WISDOM FOR MINORITY HEALTH EQUITY**

BY L.S.

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As Minority Health Month approaches, I find myself reflecting on how true healing transcends conventional medicine. My experience at the University of Washington Community Health Professions Academy – Traditional Medicine Day specifically – not only opened my eyes to the rich heritage of Native healing practices but also taught me that these traditions offer vital solutions to the deep-rooted health disparities in Indigenous communities. To effectively address the ongoing health inequities in Native communities, Western medicine must embrace and integrate traditional Native healing practices.

I vividly recall my conversation with Dr. Terry Maresca, a member of the Mohawk tribe and former director of the University of Washington School of Medicine's Native American Center of Excellence, whom I had the honor of meeting last year and interviewing recently. She shared, "Working with spiritual leaders, community elders, and ceremony has always been a way to address grief, trauma, mood disruptions, and addiction disorders" (Dr. Maresca Interview, 2025). Her words underscore that Native American Traditional Medicine is far more than a complementary approach—it is a time-honored, holistic practice that has sustained communities for millennia. She further emphasized, "Community members need to retain their inherent treaty right to use Traditional Medicine for wellness, acute and chronic condition treatment as a PRIMARY source" (Dr. Maresca Interview, 2025).

This perspective is echoed not only by Indigenous healers but also by global health organizations. The World Health Organization has long recognized traditional medicine as an integral part of primary healthcare, stating that "traditional medicine can offer effective, affordable and culturally acceptable solutions where modern healthcare systems may fall short" (World Health Organization, 2013). This endorsement challenges the narrow confines of Western evidence-based practice and reinforces the value of centuries-old Indigenous knowledge. Moreover, the Indian Health System, which has incorporated these practices since the 1990s, demonstrates how essential traditional healing is to community health.

The urgency of this approach is underscored by stark disparities. Evidence from the Office of Minority Health reveals that American Indians and Alaska Natives have an average life expectancy of only 67.9 years—nearly a decade shorter than non-Hispanic Whites (Office of Minority Health, 2023). Similarly, data from the Indian Health Services highlights chronic issues such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and mental health disorders that continue to disproportionately devastate these communities (Indian Health Services, 2023). The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has recently invested in community-based participatory research, affirming that integrating traditional healing with modern medicine can significantly enhance patient outcomes (NIH, 2021). Yet, misconceptions persist. As Dr. Maresca pointed out, "It's Western approaches that are the newcomers. Evidence-based Western practice does not replace practice-based evidence over millennia for our tribal communities" (Dr. Maresca Interview, 2025). Programs like the "Healing of the Canoe" in the Pacific Northwest have been rigorously evaluated and shown to reduce substance use and enhance mental wellness (HOC, 2023). This evidence challenges the dominant narrative and calls for a more inclusive understanding of effective healthcare.

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Minority Health Month is a call to action for all of us—non-Native individuals, healthcare providers, and policymakers alike—to support Indigenous-led public health initiatives. As Dr. Maresca advises, “Allow Native communities to create the public health messages that work for them” (Dr. Maresca Interview, 2025). When Indigenous voices guide the conversation, culturally resonant and sustainable solutions emerge. Embracing Native American Traditional Medicine requires reimagining healthcare as a collaboration between ancient wisdom and modern science—one that truly paves the way toward lasting health equity.

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