

Spirit

a story dedicated to
[Native American Heritage Month](#)



The following article contains health statistics and facts, but the main character is fictional yet important to help illustrate the health disparities that exist in the Native American population.

My name is Catori, which means Spirit. I am a member of the Blackfeet Nation living in Montana. I am a physician, but not because my teachers guided me to this profession. On the contrary, I was told I should pursue a lower level career choice because of my background. Had I listened and followed their advice I would not be here to tell you about the health struggles most Native Americans endure daily.

There are not many elders in my family because Native Americans typically live 20 years less than most Americans. My uncle recently committed suicide. Native Americans have the highest rate of suicide in the nation. My aunt has diabetes that is poorly controlled. The chances of her suffering severe complications or dying from this far exceeds the possibility of this occurring in most Americans. Poverty limits her food choices and how often she can fill her prescriptions.

Cancer, cardiovascular disease, homicide, accidents, alcoholism and pneumonia cause some of the highest rates of premature death in Native Americans and Alaskans.

I do have some positive news. The number of young children in our extended family has increased in recent years. This is because infant mortality was down by 67 percent from 1974 to 2009.

The [Indian Health Service](#) (IHS) provides the largest amount of health care for Native Americans, yet it is an agency not known by most Americans. Most of my tribe live in chronic poverty with limited access to health care because of geographic location and because IHS has limited funding that can handle less than 55 percent of the services required.

As a Native American, I am hopeful that the National Congress of American Indians and the National Indian Health Board will work to create solutions to improve our health care by engaging tribal leadership and increasing Native health care professionals and educators. More Native health professionals are needed since they are perceived with a higher level of trust by members of our community and they understand our culture.

I do see our health improving in the future, but so far, the efforts are only a ripple in a pond. We need the force of an ocean wave to move this initiative more forcefully.

My family and I thank you for your interest and allowing us to share some knowledge of the plight of our people.

Author: Joan Grzybowski, DO, FACOFP
(speaking for a fictitious but voiceless Catori)