American Indians and Alaska Natives: How Do They Find their Path to Medical School?

"It's hard to leave because it's a different world. That was a big obstacle. I didn't only go through culture shock moving off the reservation into a big city. I went through culture shock...from who I was there into this whole professional role, being a young new doctor, it's been a challenge to accept it...It's been a challenge in my community to accept it too."

— Native medical student

Background: American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/ANs) remain underrepresented in the medical profession. This study sought to understand the supports and barriers that AI/AN students encountered on their path to successful medical school entry.

Methods: This study content-analyzed qualitative semistructured, one-on-one, confidential interviews with 10 AI/AN students at the University of Washington School of Medicine to identify salient support and barrier themes.

Major Findings:

✖ Educational experiences from elementary school to college were the most frequently mentioned supports, but poor educational experiences also hindered students on their path to medical school.

✖ Both positive and negative health care experiences motivated students to pursue a health career. Negative experiences sometimes created an image of physicians that students had to overcome.

✖ Ties to family, friends, and Native communities both supported students and created conflict between Native culture and the culture of modern Western medicine.

✖ Students reported financial barriers severe enough to constrain participation in the medical school application process.

✖ Spirituality played an important role in the lives of these students as they pursued a medical career.

✖ Half the students described either direct or indirect racial discrimination.

Policy Implications: Promoting greater AI/AN participation in medical careers can be facilitated with strategies appropriate to the academic, financial, and cultural needs of AI/AN students. Strategies based on this study’s findings and on the authors’ experience conducting programs to support AI/ANs pursuing health professions are documented in WWAMI Center for Health Workforce Studies Working Paper #101.*

Findings from this study are more fully described in WWAMI Center for Health Workforce Studies Working Paper #86: Hollow WB, Patterson DG, Olsen PM, Baldwin LM, American Indians and Alaska Natives: How Do They Find their Path to Medical School? January 2004.