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Association of American Indian Physicians
Cross Cultural Medicine Workshop
April 24-27, 2003
Santa Fe, New Mexico

“Respecting Traditional and Western Medicine”

by

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April 23, 2003

Good evening. It is a pleasure to be asked by the Association of American Indian Physicians to welcome you to this evening’s reception. Dr. Muneta, thank you for inviting me. I am especially pleased to do so for the conference that will begin tomorrow on Cross Cultural Medicine.

As the Interim Director of the Indian Health Service, and as a 20-year veteran of serving at various Indian Health Service facilities as a dentist and in other capacities, I am acutely aware that the blending of Traditional and western medicine is possible, it is a responsible thing to do, and it can be done in a respectful way. Wellness cannot be prescribed or surgically achieved. Wellness is harmony with oneself, one’s beliefs, one’s traditions, and one’s environment. From when I was a young Cherokee I knew this. And the employees of the Indian Health Service know this. I am pleased that the AAIP is committed to helping others understand this as well, because many of our providers are contracted from the community and may not have the benefit of knowing our ways or respecting them.

Dr. Muneta and I, and the AAIP, also share another goal – increasing the number of American Indian and Alaska Native students in health programs. The work AAIP has done with the Association of Native American Medical Students, your mentoring program, and your National Native American Youth Initiative has done much to help Indian students enter health professions and graduate from medical schools. I hope some of these students consider the Indian Health Service as a career option. The IHS scholarship program is also helping students – in the preparatory scholarship program we have 117 students in pre-medicine, 38 in pre-dental, and 186 students preparing for entry into other health and health-related professions. In our health professions scholarship program we have 707 students. The Department is also contributing to the health workforce – soon after I was appointed Interim Director I was privileged to represent Secretary Thompson in awarding a substantial grant to the Lakota-Sioux College to help Indian nursing students complete their nursing degrees.

The text is the basis of Dr. Grim’s oral remarks at the AAIP Cross Cultural Meeting in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on Wednesday, April 23, 2003. It should be used with the understanding that some material may have been added or omitted during presentation.

These programs and organizations like AAIP are making a difference. In 1981, 16% of the IHS health provider staff was American Indian; today it is 37%. Of the 807 physicians we have in the organization today, 9% are American Indian or Alaska Native.

Making a difference includes increasing our collective voice so that those in decision-making positions will hear about issues that affect what we do. AAIP's role as a member of the Alliance of Minority Medical Associations is one strong voice that can strengthen the message of what is needed for minority populations to receive the benefits of this great nation. Also, the upcoming National Health Leadership Summit on racial disparities in health care can benefit from our participation and the participation of the AAIP. The overall goals of the Alliance are achievable, and considering the current challenges facing the nation, the Alliance is correct that aligning the health care needs of minority populations with the nation's healthcare needs is one way to ensure that Indian programs do not get overshadowed.

I look forward to working with you on eliminating health disparities between our people and the rest of the nation, increasing the number of Indians in the health and research professions, and honoring Traditional Medicine ways as we raise the health status of American Indians and Alaska Natives.

Thank you.