



2008 Aberdeen Area Awards Ceremony

March 26, 2008
Aberdeen, South Dakota

Making a Positive Difference for Our Tribes

by

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Greetings to all of you. Many thanks for inviting me to participate in this year's Aberdeen Area Banquet. I really look forward to events such as this one because it gives our Indian Health Service (IHS) family an important opportunity to recognize and thank our exceptional employees who ultimately make it possible for us to provide the best and most compassionate care to our patients. Health care is a labor intensive profession and we are grateful for the dedicated and caring workers we have throughout the IHS.

With its wide-open rural spaces and long distances between IHS and tribal facilities and the few regional referral centers, the Aberdeen Area certainly is one of the most geographically challenging in the IHS system. Aberdeen Area employees also navigate through an equally diverse set of challenges and working conditions.

Because Aberdeen has traditionally provided direct services to Tribes, it also has been skilled in working in tandem with its tribal partners. For example, your adaptation to the Area's much expanded electronic health records system will yield critical improvements in many areas such as reducing medication errors. Your teamwork and performance in working on behavioral health changes among our patients is especially critical for the future. Previously we focused on improving environmental conditions, such as safe water and new sanitary sewer systems. But now the future in Aberdeen is clearly about reducing, and someday even eliminating, our high rates of diabetes, alcoholism, obesity, cancer, heart disease, and other serious problems.

I want to commend the Aberdeen Area on its innovative use of Good Health TV, which I understand is now broadcast to nearly all of the Area's facilities. The messages about healthy

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living and practices on Good Health TV will go a long way toward improving behavioral health in the Aberdeen Area.

On a personal note, I want to say how proud and honored I am to be serving as the acting director of the IHS. I worked closely with Dr. Grim in carrying out his three main IHS Director's initiatives, and I plan to continue to make health promotion/disease prevention, behavioral health, and chronic care the focus of our work and aspirations. These initiatives are linked together and have the potential to achieve positive improvements in the health of Indian people.

Our job in the Indian Health Service is to serve tribal people, to make their lives better, to protect them from harm, to heal them from their ailments, and to help them recover from adversity. I do not know of a finer calling than to work as a member of the Indian Health Service family. We often work long hours and face difficult challenges in our quest to make a difference. However, our perseverance eventually pays off. We can look at the statistics of Indian health over the years, and this effort to make a difference clearly reveals itself. Each of you should each be proud of the part you play in improving the health status and quality of life of American Indians and Alaska Natives. I want to also say thank you to your families. I know you often make sacrifices when we travel and work long hours on difficult issues. We truly appreciate your support and it is more important than you may realize.

We are gathered here today to recognize the special achievements of those who have taken that extra step to get the job done. It is a way of showing our appreciation and recognition for a job well done.

Dedication and long careers of service to American Indian and Alaska Native people are a hallmark of IHS employees. I'd be remiss if I didn't recognize and thank four Aberdeen Area employees whose combined service spans an amazing 171 years! I understand these four women are very modest and did not want the attention that attending this ceremony would bring. Still, I would like to at least mention their names and years of service:

Geniva Doenofer, Winnebago, 45 years

Muriel Redowl, Rosebud, 43 years

Marie Owen, Fort Thompson, 42 years

Marilyn Silk, Standing Rock, 41 years

Thank you all for your hospitality, your dedication, and your hard work, and for this opportunity to spend time with you and your families in recognizing your achievements.

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