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Training a Generation of Dentists for Indian Reservations

By Katherine Mangan

Growing up on the Pine Ridge Reservation, in South Dakota, Tracy Charging Crow recalls the eureka moment when she zeroed in on her chosen career.

She was a sophomore in high school, attending a health-care retreat sponsored by Creighton University, when a dental student encouraged her to try her hand at preparing a practice tooth for a filling. "I was looking for my niche, and the minute I drilled into that tooth, I knew I had found it," says the 26-year-old member of the Lakota Sioux tribe, whose only recent encounter with a dentist before that had involved a painful extraction. "Everyone was so friendly and supportive, and it just clicked for me."

Ms. Charging Crow went on to receive an undergraduate degree from Creighton and is now enrolled there as a second-year dental student. She is part of a small but growing number of American Indian dental students recruited and nurtured in recent years by the Jesuit university, in Omaha.

There are roughly four million American Indians in the United States, a little over 1 percent of the total population. They account for fewer than 150 dentists, however, according to the Society of American Indian Dentists. The shortage has contributed to higher-than-average levels of tooth decay and periodontal disease among American Indians, health officials note.



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Creighton reports that the four American Indians in the current first-year dentistry class represent the highest such enrollment among the country's 59 accredited dental schools. While four may not sound like a lot, last year all dental schools combined had only 24 American Indians among their 4,831 first-year students, according to the American Dental Education Association. Creighton

also has four second-year students from that population.

In 2008 the dental school and two other Jesuit institutions, Gonzaga and Marquette Universities, shared a two-year, \$200,000 grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to raise the number of American Indian enrollees. Most of the money has gone toward scholarships and support for a monthlong summer-enrichment program that exposes American Indian high-school and college students to careers in dentistry.

The money also helps pay for a 13-month postbaccalaureate program for disadvantaged students, designed to strengthen their academic credentials. Creighton expanded the program to include three American Indian students per year. Students who meet certain academic criteria when they graduate are guaranteed a spot in the first-year dental class. Creighton supplemented the grant by kicking in an extra \$100,000.

Seth Brooks, a member of the Choctaw tribe, credits the program with turning him from an English major with mediocre grades into a serious dental-school applicant with strong science skills. He's now a freshman at the University of Oklahoma's dental school. "My scores on the dental exam took a massive jump," he says, "and I enrolled at Oklahoma to be closer to my wife. None of it would have been possible without the postbac program."

Applications to Creighton's summer program soared from four last year to 25 this year. In addition to having their costs covered, students this past summer each received a \$1,000 stipend.

Upper-level students mentor rookies in the summer program as they try their hand at filling cavities and performing root canals on mannequins. The summer-school students also assist their mentors as they treat real patients in university clinics.

Faculty members at Creighton make an effort to be sensitive to potential cultural barriers. Some American Indian students object, for religious and other reasons, to working on cadavers. Faculty members who teach gross anatomy have helped such students find alternative exercises or allowed them to perform ceremonies before and after handling cadavers or extracted teeth.

"It's been a learning experience for us on how to handle these issues with sensitivity," says Frank J. Ayers, who retired in June as associate dean for student affairs and director of admissions at the dental school.

For instance, incoming freshmen are asked to bring extracted teeth from their local dentists for students to study. But a Navajo student

reported that her tribe's dentists typically return teeth to patients, notes Kelly A. Gould, an assistant professor of community and preventive dentistry, so faculty members pitched in to collect teeth from other dentists.

Students who grow up on reservations have few role models in the dental profession. Because of poverty and lack of access to dentists, many students may not see a dentist until they are in their teens. By then, serious tooth decay has often set in, and their first encounter with a dentist isn't likely to endear them to the profession.

"The cost of dental school is also a factor," says Dr. Ayers. "Most students attending dental school have to borrow a lot of money, and when you're a poor kid growing up on a reservation, you're hesitant to go into that kind of debt."

Some non-Indian dentists pay off dental-school loans by spending a few years in public service on a reservation, so turnover there is high. Ms. Charging Crow wants to return to her reservation and offer her patients continuity.

"I was born and raised on Pine Ridge Reservation," she says, "and I know how hard it can be for families to decide between putting food on the table and driving you into town to go to the dentist."

She was attracted to dentistry because, she says, "I'm a very friendly person, and I enjoy getting to know people. I like to see immediate results, and if they're in pain, I like to think that I can use my skills to alleviate that pain."

Ms. Charging Crow is the kind of student, with intense loyalty to her tribe, that Creighton seeks out. "If students have a strong tribal affiliation when they enter a profession, they are much more likely to return to the reservations to provide health care to their people," says Dr. Ayers.

Part of the draw for American Indian students is Creighton's support network. The university, with 7,385 students in all, has 69 American Indians enrolled full time. This year it opened a Native American Center to coordinate outreach programs, like the health-care services it offers on reservations in Nebraska and South Dakota.

Creighton's dental school also recruits students at other Jesuit universities, as well as at the private secondary schools that some of those universities have established on reservations.

One of the most effective recruiters is George Blue Spruce Jr., who earned his D.D.S. from Creighton in 1956 and became the first American Indian dentist in the United States. He later served as an

assistant U.S. surgeon general, and is now an assistant dean at the dental school of A.T. Still University of Health Sciences, in Mesa, Ariz.

Dr. Ayers hopes Creighton's program serves as a model to other dental schools. "Even if we doubled our program to eight students per class," he says, "it would take centuries to solve the problem."

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