

Special Commentary

From the Indian Health Service

The Office of Mental Health Programs within the Indian Health Service is, in addition to tribal programs, one of the major fronts for advancing the quality of mental health care provided to American Indians and Alaska Natives. The National Center for American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research looks forward to working closely with the Indian Health Service in this regard, bringing to bear state-of-the-art research techniques on questions of immediate relevance to the latter's service mission. In a similar vein, we think that it is important to support their efforts and initiatives. Toward this end, Dr. Scott Nelson, Chief, Office of Mental Health Programs, Indian Health Service has been invited to contribute a column about his organization's activities. Dr. Nelson is relatively new to the IHS, having assumed his leadership position approximately six months ago. He is a psychiatrist with extensive public health service and has occupied a number of important state administrative positions, including most recently mental health commissioner for Pennsylvania.--The Editor

As Chief of Mental health Programs for the Indian Health Service (IHS), I am pleased to be asked to write an occasional column for the *Journal of the National Center*.

About 400 Indian Tribes have been recognized in the United States as sovereign nations. The Indian Health Service operates and/or contracts for health and mental health services for many of the Tribes, while Tribes themselves are increasingly administering their own services pursuant to the provisions of Public Law 93-638. The Indian Self-Determination Act of 1975.

The mental health programs at the local service unit level vary considerably in scope and focus. Most programs consist of mental health professional staff working together with indigenous Indian mental health technicians to provide counseling services, liaison with other related service programs and prevention/education programs for the Tribal community. The staff is supported by limited psychiatric consultation.

The Indian Health Service has recently promulgated program standards in an effort to encourage quality programs, continuity of care, and collaboration with related service providers. In addition, a team of professionals has been assembled in the office of mental health to provide consultation to Tribes on ways of reducing suicide and violent behavior.

Critical to improved understanding and treatment of mental illness in American Indian and Alaska Native populations is culturally-sensitive mental health research. It is highly encouraging that the National Center

has been revitalized to train Indian professional research investigators and in the process to assist Indian tribes and the Indian Health Service in their mission of providing and improving mental health and substance abuse services and education for Indian people. The high incidence in many tribes of depression, suicide (especially in young Indian males), and various forms of violence, all usually associated with alcohol use, make the work of the Center all the more urgently needed.

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