

Announcer:

In this episode of Tim Talk, Tim starts a new series of discussions about cultural considerations in providing healthcare to Native Americans.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you for joining us for Tim Talk. I'm Tim Dentry, President and CEO of Northern Light Health. Through this podcast we help to break down barriers, embrace diversity, and focus on issues of racial, social, and medical justice. Our guest today is Pam Hand, a Northern Light Health employee and Information Systems Infrastructure Administration and Billing. For today's discussion, very importantly, she is Yanktonai, Dakota and a tribal member of Crow Creek Reservation South Dakota, which is part of the [foreign language 00:00:48], which is the Council of Seven Fires generally referred to as the Sioux Nation.

Tim Dentry:

Pam, it's a distinct pleasure that I have right now to have you on our show.

Pam Hand:

Thank you for having me, Tim. It's a pleasure to be here.

Tim Dentry:

When you and I had a little huddle for this recording, you shared so much again with me on your wonderful background here in Maine, and with Northern Light, and prior to that of course, Eastern Maine Healthcare Systems over the last 23 years. And so much time also, 17 I think, years with the EMMC. Just share a bit about that. Also, I love to speak in stories. I think it drives home really good points of character and what people are all about.

Tim Dentry:

You shared with me two stories. Martin Luther King Day is one, that was at the Orono Campus of University of Maine, if I'm not mistaken. And number two, fairy dust. To you, Pam.

Pam Hand:

Thank you, Tim. I've had the pleasure of working for Northern Light Health for 23 years. 17 of those years were spent at the EMMC campus. So, it's been a very rewarding experience, because I've learned so much from leaders and staff throughout the years. I'll share with you an amazing story about diversity. Many years ago, I was invited along with two of my colleagues to attend the Martin Luther King celebration at the University of Maine. My two colleagues are Haitian.

Pam Hand:

When we arrived at the table with the big EMH sign, I made a joke stating that we weren't very diverse if all we had representing the entire organization were two Haitians and one American Indian. Everyone chuckled, and it was all in good fun, of course. We've come a long way in diversity since then. The fairy dust story is a story that's very near and dear to my heart. I was asked by executive leadership via email to play the Brahms's Lullaby over the paging system at EMMC whenever we had a birth.

Pam Hand:

I replied saying that I felt the Brahm's Lullaby was inappropriate. I stated that if I was a Jewish woman, I wouldn't want to hear a Yiddish lullaby. In my own personal case, I would want to hear [foreign language 00:03:26], which is the Four Directions song to the Great Spirit. I felt that if we were going to announce and celebrate bringing a new life into this world, we needed to find something that would not offend anyone, and would be accepted across all cultures.

Pam Hand:

I finally a Scottish percussionist. Her name is Evelyn Glennie, who is deaf by the way. I extracted a sound clip from one of her pieces called Fairy Dust. When we contacted her, she was so thrilled that her attorneys gave us exclusive rights to using it, only charging us a small one time copyright fee. So now, when you walk down the hallways at EMMC and hear the twinkling bells, you'll know the story behind it.

Tim Dentry:

That's fabulous. Just a couple of thoughts. One is, I love how you said we've come a long way in diversity. That's one of the great outcomes for me personally through these podcasts as I've gotten to know it, a lot of the people that I work with or associate with outside of Northern Light even on such a deeper level. I just think it is reinforcing all the time of our wonderful diversity and the wonderful nature of people that we can get to know, which enriches our own lives. That just enriched my life already, Pam. You've touched me already.

Tim Dentry:

I love how you said we've come a long way in diversity. It really leads to my second point too of, the cultural sensitivity that you expressed with that song that would be played overhead. When I spent a lot of time at Eastern Maine Medical Center, I would hear that. I didn't even realize it was called Fairy Dust at the time. That's so interesting that it's of Scottish origin from a Scots woman who created that, who composed that. What I love is, it's a positive outcome.

Tim Dentry:

In both of those cases, it's coming a long way in diversity, and a cultural sensitivity that led to a positive outcome, how many hundreds of families and how many hundreds of times, thousands of times, have our East Maine Medical Center employees heard that played overhead no matter the stressors of the day, feel uplifted and "Ah, a new life is coming in the world." In both of those cases, I think it's part of the challenge that we have in society these days, is that how do you take what could potentially be a divisive issue or a stress additive issue, or some way in which we're less of one, and create more of one.

Tim Dentry:

That's wonderful, the way that you frame that up, Pam, and you gave those examples. That's terrific. Now I'd like to lead to really the next thing I'd like to understand from you, and our listeners can learn from you. That is that, you have shared that spirituality plays a significant role in Native American medicine. By the way, some of the material that I understand you helped to author, that folks gave to me to read ahead of time was terrific.

Tim Dentry:

I think my initial response to you, when you and I were talking, was that these are the kinds of spiritual recognitions or spiritual elements that my daughters, who have been in healthcare, delivering babies, et

cetera, and other healthcare challenges and needs, thank goodness not too severe or seriously, but we're not Native American, but it's the same kind of spiritual sensitivity that they would say to me as well which I just think is really interesting. To get to my question, what would you say are the most important takeaways and sensitivities that people who are non-Native should know about this?

Pam Hand:

Okay, Tim. Starting off, I think it's important to explain a little bit about the concept of Native American spirituality. In many Native American languages, there is no word for "religion", because spiritual practices are part of everyday life, part of our daily life. They are necessary for the harmony and balance, or wellness of the individual, the family, the clan, and the community.

Pam Hand:

Healing and worship are considered one and the same. Although spirituality has played an essential part of healing for most of mankind, modern medicine has embraced a Western view of the human body where wellness is more of an engineering problem, and the body is the sum of discrete parts rather than a complex whole. This might be accepted as the norm today, but it's in complete contrast to the Native American tradition where the spirit is connected to healing.

Pam Hand:

Neither approaches holy [inaudible 00:08:57] in modern times, and many Native American groups have adopted their healing beliefs and practices to work in tandem with modern medicine and technology through integration. We've also still embraced the traditional methods as a form of cultural autonomy. I guess to explain it a little better, modern medicine is mechanistic and individualistic, and traditional Native American ideas of health and illness are steeped in spirituality.

Pam Hand:

Although, healing practices may vary based on each tribal nation, we all have four constructs of spirituality that are a common thread to most of our cultural belief systems, and that is the Creator, the Mother Earth, the Father Sky, or the Great Spirit among other names. That refers to the universal spiritual force, and that is what is looked to for guidance by individuals and the community itself among tribal nations and Native communities.

Pam Hand:

It's a belief that in a life force that pervades all creation, and it also helps explain Native Americans' intimate connection with nature, which is very important to us. Since all of creation, from plants, to rocks, to lightening has spiritual energy, everything is intimately connected and worthy of respect. The other constructs are the community, which includes the family and the tribe, the environment, and nature, and the self.

Pam Hand:

Spirituality is not just a part of life, but it is life. The mind, body, and spirit are interconnected just as the spiritual world interacts with the physical world. Most Native American healers stress that harmony will restore balance in all areas of a patient's life, the physical, the spiritual, the mental. In other words, wellness is harmony in mind, body, and spirit. Un-wellness is disharmony in mind, body, and spirit. So, to

sum up this terminology of Native Americans, spirituality basically means walking the path of good medicine, living a good way of life.

Pam Hand:

In my tribe, we call it [foreign language 00:11:44], walking in the red road in harmony and balance, because it's through the harmonious interaction of the mind, body, and spirit in the natural environment, we consider this all our relations, which are all living beings within the entire circle of life.

Tim Dentry:

That's beautifully described. I hope our listeners really listen deeply, even re-listen to what you just said, because I think it's fabulous words for all of us to keep in mind. I think it would give us greater sensitivity as caregivers to those that we serve, knowing that as you say, they live spirituality. Spirituality is life. I think also, everyone in healthcare understands mind, body, spirit, that all three are interconnected.

Tim Dentry:

In healthcare, you have to have an appreciation for all those, mind, body, and the spirit. I love how you use the words "it's about harmony and balance". What I like to think is, it's also about however one has that balance within them, mind, body, and spirit, and however people either practice or believe what have you in the spirituality, to me I always look for universal truths. I believe that being part of a higher purpose or understanding that there's a higher cause that we strive for, and there's a higher power beyond ourselves, to me it's empowering. It's very empowering.

Tim Dentry:

It's oneness, which I've shared so many times because that's what got us on this path of these podcasts and our quest for great diversity, equity, and inclusion for Northern Light Health. Certainly, it's not to change society, but it is to make sure that within our Northern Light Health family that we are an organization, a large family which really lives a culture of caring for one another. Oneness is one thing I've talked about before that one of our lead physicians planted in my mind several years ago, that our ultimate goal isn't to strive to be a system. Our ultimate goal is to strive to be one, and creating oneness among many diverse backgrounds, diverse sense of where our heritages has brought us all together in this moment in time to me is just a thing of beauty.

Tim Dentry:

It really is. You've helped us to understand that, Pam. I really, really appreciate that.

Pam Hand:

Well, thank you, Tim.

Tim Dentry:

We have a couple more minutes. I'm just wondering if you'd like to expand a bit on the classes that you've offered to providers, specifically at Eastern Maine Medical Center, about providing healthcare to Native American patients. Can you just let our listeners know a bit more about that work, and what's entailed, but more importantly what you learned from those that you were teaching?

Pam Hand:

Thank you. It will be a pleasure to do that. First of all, Native Americans frequently combine traditional healing practices with Western medicine to promote health and wellbeing. Native people hold a holistic perspective on health based on the balance of interrelationships of mind, body, spirit, and environment as we've previously discussed. We also use ceremony, Native herbal remedies, and allopathic medications which are used side by side.

Pam Hand:

Spiritual treatments are thus an important part of health promotion in healing in Native American culture, yet the role of spirituality in healthcare, health promotion and wellness, I found that for some providers it was a little uncomfortable, providers of Western medicine. Over the years, I have been honored to assist providers with many questions about Native Americans being treated. They've called me on the phone, asked me to come to meetings. It's been an honor to assist them in their questions.

Pam Hand:

One thing that's important to realize is that Native Americans will often rate their traditional healer's advice more highly than the advice of the physicians. That can lead to confusion for the provider when it comes to treating the patient. Because of this, I wanted to provide classes and give a blueprint to providers on providing healthcare to Native American patients. So, I covered different topics, Native American spirituality, traditional practices, along with the importance of smudging, which for many Native Americans is a daily practice.

Pam Hand:

It becomes an issue with hospitalization. The role of tribal leaders, I cover medical and nursing care, childbirth, which is an important part of the lessons that I give due to the fact that I've received many phone calls about Native American women keeping the placenta. So, covering that has been I think valuable for the nurses and the providers up in the labor and delivery areas. I cover nutrition, and I cover the care of the elders, who we call "Wisdom Keepers," and I cover palliative care.

Pam Hand:

So, in our culture we have a saying, and in my language it is [foreign language 00:18:18], which means we are all related. That means, literally, we are all relatives. All things live in relationship to one another. So, living in harmony with the earth and our environment has meaning and purpose not only for us, but for the whole, the earth, it's peoples and all that is. So, I think understanding the significance for both the Native American patient and the provider assisting with the path to healing.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you, Pam. That's wonderful. Wisdom Keepers, I really enjoy that. I'm not sure if I can refer to you as a Wisdom Keeper because you're younger than me... Are you a Wisdom Keeper?

Pam Hand:

I am considered to be an elder among the tribe, so yes, I've reached that point where I am a Wisdom Keeper.

Tim Dentry:

Well, it shows, and I really appreciate you-

This transcript was exported on Apr 11, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

Pam Hand:

Thank you.

Tim Dentry:

... and what you've shared with us. Thank you so much, Pam, for being my honored guest. I just feel very privileged to have done this with you.

Pam Hand:

Thank you, Tim. It was a pleasure.

Tim Dentry:

Thank you, to you, our podcast listeners. Until next time, saying thanks one more time to Pam Hand, I'm Tim Dentry encouraging you to listen and act to promote our culture of caring, diversity, and inclusion. Thank you.

Announcer:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Tim Talk. In our next episode, we begin to discuss the Makwi Program, a culturally informed initiative to address opioid use disorder in Maine's Native American communities.