

# National Indian Health Board



## SCIA HOLDS OVERSIGHT HEARING ON DIABETES CRISIS IN INDIAN COUNTRY

The Senate Committee on Indian Affairs conducted an oversight hearing June 30, 2010, “A Way Out of the Diabetes Crisis in Indian Country and Beyond,” to examine the impact of diabetes and progress that has been made in recent years to address this disease. American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) populations suffer disproportionately from diabetes, with a prevalence rate of 16.5% nationally. Additionally, in recent years, a marked increase in type II diabetes has been noted in AI/AN youth; notably 161% increase youth less than 15 years of age between 1990-2009.

Committee Chairman Byron Dorgan (D-ND) began the hearing discussing the prevalence of diabetes in Indian Country, and the devastating effects of the disease on Native Americans. He also highlighted the story of Isabel ‘Izzy’ Burger, an 11 year old girl, a member of the Little River Band of Ottawa Indians, and the daily struggle she faces in controlling her diabetes. Isabel was in attendance in the audience and was recognized by Senator Dorgan for her courage in facing the disease and allowing him to share her story with the Committee.

Witness Dr. Judith Fradkin, MD, Division of Diabetes, Endocrinology and Metabolic Diseases, National Institutes of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases, National Institutes of Health, US Department of Health and Human Services related the recent advances that have been made in diabetes research. In her remarks, she stated that the cost of diabetes in 2007 was \$174 billion dollars. The research funds made available through the Special Diabetes Program have lead to several promising treatments for type I diabetes, including the development of continuous blood glucose monitoring devices that assist with control of blood glucose levels, resulting in lower HbA1c findings in clinical trials, an indicator of better blood glucose management. The work of NIH is yielding similar promising results for type II diabetics, assisting with prevention strategies for youth to decrease the likelihood of developing the disease or associated risks such as cardiovascular disease. Wes Studi, Professional Actor and Native American Health Advocate added to the discussion offering the linkage to effective diabetes case management as a result of the Special Diabetes Program for Indians. Mr. Studi related the story of Ulela Harris of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and her success in taking control of her diabetes due to the availability of prevention programs made available through SDPI funding at her community. Gary Hall, Jr., 10-time Olympic swimming medalist related his personal story and the impact diabetes had not only on his Olympic career, but the reality of the many complications diabetes presents in his life. Dr. Melvina McCabe, MD, President, Association of American Indian Physicians spoke to those in attendance about her experiences as a physician. She emphasized what works in AI/communities stating that lifestyle interventions are the key to successful diabetes

management and prevention. Dr. McCabe also related the challenges to successful treatment due to conditions in AI/ AN communities that mainstream America takes for granted. The simple factor of having electricity in the home was one point of her discussion, “Without electricity, how do we store our insulin properly, how do we store healthy foods...?” Ms. Caitlin Baker, 16 years old of the Muscogee Creek Tribe, spoke about her organization, CAITLINB. CAITLINB is an outreach and prevention program aimed at youth, encouraging healthy lifestyle choices, including increasing exercise and making health eating choices, and her successes in Indian Country with peer to peer discussions.

After questions to the panel, Senator Dorgan asked Isabel Burger to come to the table to discuss the impact diabetes has had on her life. Ms. Burger’s unscripted remarks described that diabetes is a significant factor in her life. “If I am not feeling well, I have to correct so I can do what other kids do,” she said.

At the conclusion, Senator Dorgan expressed his continuing dedication, and the dedication of the Committee to support diabetes treatment and prevention efforts in Indian Country.

J. Burger, RN, Deputy Director, NIHB.