

# Chronological: Indian Health, George Washington University, 1995-04-15

Senator Daniel K. Inouye Papers  
Speeches, Box SP10, Folder 60  
<http://hdl.handle.net/10524/63456>

---

Items in eVols are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated.

*UHM Library Digital Collections Disclaimer and Copyright Information*

PEECH GIVEN BY SENATOR DANIEL K. INOUE  
GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY, DEPT. OF BIOCHEMISTRY AND  
MOLECULAR BIOLOGY. SUBJECT: INDIAN HEALTH  
DATE: 4-15-95

I am honored to be here this evening to accept the 1995 Distinguished Public Service Award. During my 36 years of public service, I have had the privilege of working with many distinguished and dedicated public servants, and I am proud to join the ranks of previous awardees such as my good friend Senator Bob Dole, the late Congressman Claude Pepper, and Vice President Al Gore. I consider it an honor and privilege to have served our nation and my native State of Hawaii here in Washington for so many years. One of the benefits of this national service is the ability to address special interests and concerns across the broad national spectrum. Needless to say, health and science have been two of my special interests for many years. I'd like to take a few minutes this evening to address one particular area of health services that has become very important to me in recent years.

While our nation is vigorously debating mammography, medical malpractice, high technologies (such as MRI and laser surgery), and organ transplants of virtually every organ, we have in our nation statistics that seem out of place. There is a group of people in the United States who are important to us historically, morally, and legally, and who are experiencing the following health statistics: They suffer more than four times the death rate of our nation due to tuberculosis (440 %) and alcoholism (430 %). They die at one and one-half times the rate of the rest of America from accidents (165 %) and diabetes mellitus (154 %). And death rates from homicide (50 %), pneumonia and influenza (46 %), and suicide (43 %) are fifty percent higher than the average U.S. citizen.

But the one statistic that perhaps best demonstrates the devastation of this group of Americans as a result of abnormally high death rates over the past two centuries is that the percentage of their population that has lived to 65 years of age or greater is less than half that of the rest of the country -- only six percent compared with thirteen percent. Who are these Americans? I speak of our Native Americans -- the American Indians.

How is it that one of the most medically progressive nations in the world -- and arguably the nation with the highest quality of health care -- tolerates these deplorable health statistics? Unfortunately, for

the Native Americans, this kind of treatment -- or in this case lack of treatment -- is only too familiar and representative of their historical relationship with the United States.

When I became Chairman of the Indian Affairs Committee in 1989, I spent a great deal of time studying the history of the Native Americans, especially over the past 200 years -- and what I found dismayed me. But now I am pleased to tell you that there is an awakening going on -- a realization that most Americans know very little about the treatment of the native people when non-native people came to our shores and the events that transpired thereafter.

Americans are learning that there were many trails of tears, and that of the 800 treaties that were entered into with Indian tribes and nations, 430 of them were never ratified by the United States Senate, and of the 370 that were ratified by my predecessors in the Senate, the United States proceeded to violate provisions in every single one of them, while the native people were held to all of their commitments.

There is even a growing realization that through the cession of millions of acres of land to the United States, Indian people in effect purchased the first pre-paid health plan in America's history.

But until the last decade, the health services that the Indians received "gratis" of the United States were not very many. As recently as 20 years ago, the average life expectancy of a Native American was more than ten years less than for the rest of Americans -- just slightly more than 60 years. Deaths from TB were about ten times the rate for the rest of the Nation while deaths from alcoholism were more than six times the national rate. And that was almost 20 years after the Indian Health Service assumed responsibility for Indian health programs in 1955.

Although the overall health status of American Indians has improved substantially since 1955, the health of Indians is still far from comparable to that of the general U.S. population as demonstrated so vividly by the statistics I quoted earlier. I'd like to tell you in a little more detail about some of these statistics.

As I mentioned previously, perhaps the most significant indicator of Indian health status is that Indians do not live so long as other U.S. populations. In the 3-year period from 1989 to 1991 (the last year that statistics are available), 32 percent of Indian deaths occurred in Indians younger than age 45, compared with only 11 percent of U.S. all races deaths occurring in that age group.

Largely as a result of the historically premature death rates of Native Americans, their population is significantly younger than the U.S. All Race population. Consequently, the death rates were age-adjusted for comparison to eliminate the differences in observed rates. When death rates are age-adjusted, they paint an even more grim picture:

- o Accidents were the 2nd overall leading cause of death in Indians compared with the 3rd leading cause of death for U.S. population. Although accident death rates decreased 54 % since early 1970s, they were still 2.6 times that of the U.S. All Race rate in 1990.
- o Chronic liver disease and cirrhosis was the 4th leading cause of death in Indians, 3.5 times the rate in the U.S. All Race category.
- o Diabetes mellitus, the 5th leading cause of death for Indians, was 2.5 times the rate in the U.S. All Race population.
- o Alcoholism death rates, when age-adjusted, were 5.3 times higher than the U.S. All Race rate.
- o Age-adjusted tuberculosis death rates decreased 74 percent since 1974, but remained 5.4 times the rate of the rest of the country in 1990.
- o The overall leading cause of infant deaths was sudden infant death syndrome, 2.0 times the rate for Indians and for the U.S. All Race population. Similarly, accidents -- the 3rd overall cause of infant deaths -- were 3.0 times higher than the rest of the country.

Although death rates are not the only, and certainly not the most ideal, indicators of a population's health status, one can infer definite health trends among the Native Americans. It is clear that the rates for chronic diseases and preventable health problems far exceed those in the U.S. All Race population. While significant progress has been made over the past 20 years, it is difficult to understand how any one population group can be so disparate with the rest of our nation when it comes to something as basic as health care.

Before I leave you today, I want to share with you some personal observations and concerns. My grandparents came to this country believing in the abundance of opportunity that this nation promised. Their path was not an easy one -- they worked hard -- but they never abandoned the values that their ancestors, for generations, had believed in and practiced. As the eldest of the eldest son seven times, my grandfather continually impressed upon me the importance of upholding and carrying on the values and the traditions of my ancestors. It is this respect for the history, the culture, the religion, and the traditions of my forbearers that inspires these thoughts.

Today, after centuries of abuse and neglect, of economic devastation and overwhelming conditions of poverty, of insufficient education and health care, and of near loss of cultural identity, there is a resurgence of interest in Indian matters. I use the term "resurgence" advisedly, for there was a time when Indian matters were among the most important relationships with which the United States concerned itself. After all, it was the Indian tribes that played a significant and sometimes determinant role in the outcome of many revolutionary war battles. Indians fought side by side with revolutionary soldiers, they supplied the troops with food and shelter, and without them, General George Washington -- for whom this University is named -- and his men would not have survived the winter at Valley Forge.

Beginning with the Revolutionary War, and including every war and military action this nation has been engaged in since that time, Indian men and women have volunteered their service, and sacrificed their lives for this country in numbers that far exceed their representation in the U.S. population. Indians have served in the

Armed Forces at a rate that is 33 percent higher than the American population as a whole, and more than 50 percent of all Indians serving in the military serve in combat arms -- a rate far higher than any other segment of the population.

In the last six years, I have been to many Indian reservations, and have visited scores of Indian homes in some of the most remote areas of the country. In every home, I have noticed one thing -- there are pictures of young Indian men and women in uniform who have fought and, in many cases, died for this country. When I ask about these pictures, coupled with the sadness in their parents' eyes, is always an expression of pride that their sons and daughters gave their lives in the defense of the honor of our great nation. And at these times, I can't help but wonder why we, as a nation, haven't been willing to give a pint of our blood, a pound of our gold, or accord to them the dignity of life and the respect that they -- the first Americans -- so obviously deserve.

Death rates three and four times that of the rest of our nation? And from preventable diseases and injuries? And yet, we continue to begrudge and debate our responsibilities to these great people. Is this the version of Indian-American history we want our descendants to read? Surely, we can -- we must -- do much better!

If my few remarks have made you feel uneasy, then I have reached your hearts; if they have strengthened your resolve to eradicate this injustice, then I have accomplished my purpose. After centuries of turning a blind eye and a deaf ear to the well-earned rights of our Native Americans, let us finally elevate their well-being to the level of concern that all Americans -- including our Native Americans -- were promised in that most hallowed document, the Declaration of Independence.