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Alaska Native health center research focuses on building relationships

by Diana Campbell / CANHR

Sep 16, 2012 | 3274 views | 0 | 6 | | |

FAIRBANKS — We want to provide meaningful information to the people who take part in our studies at the Center for Alaska Native Health Research.

To do that, we respect Alaska Native participants and work with several Alaska Native co-researchers.

Yes, we ask participants a lot of probing questions about health, lifestyle, coping and resiliency.

But we also listen. And answer their questions.

To do our type of human health research means building trusting and lasting relationships.

"It's those face-to-face meetings that are so vital," said Bert Boyer, a molecular biologist and CANHR's director. "If we didn't have their contributions, our research would be missing valuable insight."

Boyer has vowed he won't abandon the relationships he's made with Native people during the last 11 years. It takes a mutual trust for in-depth discussions of the health disparities Alaska Native people face, Boyer said.

Most of our research is in the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta where we have had more than a dozen projects. We are working in the Interior, too, and seeking to grow. At the direction of Alaska Native people, CANHR scientists are studying obesity, diabetes, genetic interactions, cancer, suicide, substance abuse and nutrition, among other things.

The way we do this work is called community-based participatory research. It is what CANHR was based on when it began in 2001 with an \$11 million, five-year grant from the National Institutes of Health.

The University of Alaska Fairbanks, CANHR's home, wouldn't have had much of a chance to do this work before 2000. Much of the NIH's research funds went to institutions with lots of infrastructure such as medical schools. Many small universities in resource poor states had a difficult time competing with the likes of Harvard University.

Setting out to change that, NIH introduced the Institutional Development Award program — a research capacity building program. This allowed UAF to apply and in 2001, the Center for Alaska Native Health Research was one of two new Alaska-based research centers funded through the IDEa program.

CANHR is starting its 12th year. The first five years we spent building infrastructure within UAF and conducting research with junior researchers. In the next five years and another \$11 million,

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we continued the work, but some of our junior researchers became NIH-funded senior researchers.

We have more than doubled NIH initial investment of \$22 million by bringing in more research projects. That's one of the goals of the IDeA program, which is administered by the National Institute of General Medical Sciences.

For the next five years, we are providing pilot project grants for UAF scientists who want to work with CANHR. We've received 14 applications and are set to make up to four awards in November.

We have impressive scientific backing from outside UAF. In the last decade, we've established collaborative networks with other scientists, including those from University of Washington and Harvard, who work as mentors and collaborators.

Among those who advise CANHR are scientists with long and distinguished careers. Dr. William Knowler is chief of the NIH Diabetes, Epidemiology and Clinical Research Section and is a leader in the study of diabetes with his work with the Pima Indians. Beti Thompson, a behavioral scientist and Washington State Academy of Sciences member, and Alan Kristal, associate head of the Cancer Prevention program, lend their expertise from the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center.

H. Sally Smith advises CANHR on Alaska Native health issues. She sits on the National Indian Health Board of Directors and is the chairman of Bristol Bay Native Health Corp. board of directors.

All these connections have rubbed off on our researchers and participants. While they have always been good scientists, CANHR investigators are gaining reputations.

This fall National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities invited Boyer and Scarlett Hopkins, one of CANHR's core directors, to give a presentation on community partnerships,

Henry Lupie, a co-researcher from Tuntutuliak, and Walkie Charles, a Yup'ik bicultural consultant and assistant professor of the Yup'ik Eskimo language at UAF will present with them.

"It's appropriate for them to be there with us," Boyer said. "We couldn't have built the Center without the contribution of Alaska Native people."

In the coming months, CANHR will provide details our findings. For more information, visit <http://canhr.uaf.edu>.

Diana Campbell is CANHR's communication specialist. She is a tribal member of the Native Village of Venetie. CANHR is part of UAF's Institute of Arctic Biology.

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