Culture Report: Native Americans

Providing culturally competent care is essential in maternal-child nursing, where trust, communication, and family involvement are vital for positive outcomes. Native Americans, one of the most historically resilient yet underserved populations in the United States, maintain strong cultural beliefs that directly affect health practices. The traditions surrounding childbirth, family roles, communication, and healing are deeply rooted in spirituality and community. Understanding these core values allows nurses to deliver respectful, effective, and culturally sensitive care. This report explores the health beliefs, family dynamics, dietary customs, and communication norms of Native Americans, with a focus on their impact on maternal-child nursing care.

Native Americans, also known as American Indians or Alaska Natives, make up roughly 2.9% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). In Illinois, they represent a smaller group that’s approximately 0.6% but their presence is continually noticed, especially in communities surrounding Urbana. In the Urbana area, many families have ties to tribes such as Potawatomi, Kickapoo, and Ojibwe (Office of Minority Health, 2024). Though traditions and culture change between tribes, they share multiple values like spiritual healing, family support, and respect for elders that unify many Native American communities.

Core Values

Religion

Spirituality is the center of Native American life. Many tribes emphasize harmony with nature, ancestor reverence, and ritual practices. Ceremonies such as smudging, which is burning

sacred herbs, and sweat lodges are common (Koithan & Farrell, 2021). These beliefs may influence healthcare decisions, for instance, some tribes may prefer same-gender providers or spiritual rituals before procedures (Koithan & Farrell, 2021).

Healing Beliefs and Practices

Pain is often endured quietly as part of life or spiritual growth. Traditional medicine, such as herbal remedies, ceremonies, and guidance from medicine, is commonly used, either alone or alongside modern medicine. In maternal care, practices such as burying the placenta or minimizing noise during birth are culturally important (Cesario, 2020).

Family Life

Native American families are typically multigenerational, with strong respect for elders. These elders often live with or near younger family members. Childbearing is seen as a communal event, where mothers are supported by female relatives, especially grandmothers. Elders may be central decision-makers in health-related matters (Churchill et al., 2020).

Communication

Communications norms include indirect eye contact, periods of silence, and a calm speaking tone. These behaviors reflect respect, especially in clinical settings. Some tribes may have men speak on behalf of the families, although practices vary. Nurses should avoid rushing conversations and pay attention to nonverbal cues (Koithan & Farrell, 2021).

Diet

Traditional foods like corn, beans, squash, and wild game are both culturally and spiritually significant. After childbirth, some tribes encourage specific hot foods or teas to

promote healing. During hospitalization, these preferences may require special dietary accommodations (Cesario, 2020)

Implications for Maternal-Child Nursing Care

Understanding Native American values helps nurses create care plans that respect the family's traditions. For example, involving elders in perinatal education and respecting birthing rituals, such as maintaining a quiet space or delaying cord clamping, can improve the patient's comfort and trust. Nurses should avoid dismissing traditional healing practices but instead should ask how they can be honored alongside clinical care. Communication should be respectful and unhurried, acknowledging that silence or limited eye contact may be a sign of respect and not disengagement. Dietary restrictions or traditional postpartum foods should also be discussed when planning meals in the hospital.

Cultural Sensitivity

To provide culturally sensitive care for Native American patients in the maternal-child setting, nurses should consider several key interventions. First, it is important to involve family members, in particular elders, when it comes to healthcare decisions whenever possible. The reason is that their guidance is highly respected and often central to the family's values (Churchill et al., 2020). Second, nurses should ask about and accommodate traditional healing or spiritual practices, such as smudging, the use of herbal remedies, or placenta rituals, as these may be deeply meaningful to the patient and family during the labor and postpartum period. (Cesario, 2020) Finally, adopting respectful communication strategies such as allowing for silence, avoiding direct eye contact when appropriate, and using calm patient dialogue can help build trust and foster a more culturally safe environment for native American patients. (Cesario,2020)

Conclusion

In conclusion, Native American families bring rich cultural traditions into healthcare settings that should be honored and respected. In maternal-child nursing, where emotional support, spirituality, and family involvement are essential, understanding cultural values can dramatically improve outcomes and satisfaction. By learning about religious beliefs, family dynamics, communication styles, and healing traditions, nurses can build trust and holistically offer care. Culturally sensitive care is not only best practice but is a critical step towards addressing inconsistencies and promoting health equity.

Work Cited

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