Lethal Legacy: Fetal Development on the Navajo Nation

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Introduction

The legacy of uranium mining continues to have lasting health effects on Navajo mothers located in Church Rock, New Mexico who disproportionately give birth to children with birth defects due to excessive uranium tailings from mining operations (Fig. 2). Infant mortality rates on the Navajo Nation are higher than all races within the United States, and growing up on the Navajo Reservation in the Four Corners region is a culturally unique experience compared to other places in the United States. With a population of over 132,000, and a large land base, the Navajo Nation is one of the largest tribes in North America (Navajo Times January 26, 2012). Like many members of the Navajo Nation, Dine is my first language (Fig. 1). It is critical to use the Dineh language as a communication tool to educate Navajo women about uranium exposure and maternal health.

Language Barriers

In the Navajo area of Church Rock, New Mexico, uranium exposure is a health issue leading to birth defects, cancer, and the early deaths of Navajo women and children. Before mining began on the Navajo Nation, families spoke and communicated with one another in their Native language. English has been slowly replacing Navajo in communities and schools, particularly since uranium mining began. Navajo women and their families living on the reservation may or may not, understand the risk of exposure to uranium through drinking water. Navajo people passed down Indigenous Knowledge and teaching children the importance of Navajo language since creation. Utilizing Indigenous Knowledge to establish culturally relevant curriculum will connect Navajo women to a past tradition that embodies identity, culture, and Native language.

Research Question

How can Indian Health Services use the Navajo language to empower Navajo communities about uranium exposure and its impact on fetal development?

Uranium Mining on the Navajo Nation

• The Church Rock spill occurred in a low-income, rural American Indian area, close to the small city of Gallup, New Mexico. This led to the development of birth defects and was the leading cause of deaths in the area after pregnant Navajo women were exposed through drinking water in their homes. (Brugg 2007)
• Most of the respondents reported that they were never warned about radiation hazards. Because of lack of risk notification families or may not, understand the risk of exposure to uranium through drinking water. Navajo people passed down Indigenous Knowledge and teaching children the importance of Navajo language since creation. Utilizing Indigenous Knowledge to establish culturally relevant curriculum will connect Navajo women to a past tradition that embodies identity, culture, and Native language.

Impacts

• The Church Rock spill occurred in a low-income, rural American Indian area, close to the small city of Gallup, New Mexico. United Nuclear corporation began mining the largest underground uranium mine in the United States. Many people in this area relied on a nearby Puerco River for water. (Brugg 2007, p. 397)
• On July 16, 1979, 1,100 tons of radioactive mill waste and 95 million gallons of mine process affluent down Pipeline Arroyo and into the North fork of the Puerco River. This tremendous flow of spill bubble up severs, affected two nearby aquifers, left pools along the river, and transported contaminants 130 km downstream to a point near Navajo, Arizona. (Brugg 2007, p. 198)
• Within weeks, signs were posted in New Mexico and Arizona that warned against the use of water for human and livestock consumption. Water wells were closed by the New Mexico Environmental Improvement Division. (Brugg 2007, p. 598)
• To look more closely at the effects of uranium exposure on human reproduction and development 1,500 pregnant women participated in the “Navajo Birth Cohort study. A study of matched control among Navajo births over 18 years suggested that children of women who lived near abandoned uranium sites were 1.83 times more likely to have 1 of 33 selected defects. (Arnold 2014 p. 49)

Conclusions

The solution to reducing uranium exposure depends upon effective communication about health risks in the Navajo language. Indigenous Knowledge comes from our parents and elders who teach us about history, traditions, and tribal language at the earliest possible age. Therefore, I think that passing down Indigenous Knowledge and teaching each other the importance of Navajo culture and language demonstrates the importance of our parents’ and elders’ teaching, as they are the ones that pass down a tradition of respect. Helping and supporting one another is a pathway to awareness in the communities through revitalizing the use of the Navajo language.

It is important for the younger generation to take the lead in revitalizing the Navajo language. This revitalization will aid communities in their awareness of their health issues related to uranium exposure in the Navajo language. Therefore, educating in the Navajo language is an interconnection of culturally-relevant curriculum that will decrease birth defects, illnesses, and deaths on the Navajo Nation.

An educational curriculum aimed at empowering pregnant Navajo women about the risks related to uranium exposure is critical to the future of the Navajo Nation and its communities. The Indian Health Service can help to reduce health risks by providing awareness campaigns in the Navajo language through multimedia formats.

References


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