

Suicide weighs heavy on Native cultures

By Dr. Ted Mala

It is 2:30 in the morning and I can't sleep. You know the feeling, somehow you wake up from a deep sleep and start thinking about something and the next thing you know, you are wide awake.

Earlier today I was looking through the current edition of the White Cloud Journal, which is a national American Indian-Alaska Native Journal on Mental Health published Outside. It attempts to present the Native American point of view on mental health.

I was surprised to see a study published on "Suicide in Northwest Alaska" since this is my Region (NANA — Northwest Arctic Native Association) and it was talking about not only my friends but my family!

I had heard that a graduate student from the University of Chicago had obtained permission from the Indian Health Service to examine all of their files on suicide in our region so that he could do a study on Alaska Natives.

Somehow we were compared to the Navajo and other Lower 48 tribes that have long been studied, if not over-studied by major and minor researchers alike. NANA region suicide rates for the years 1975-1979 was seven times higher than the national U.S. average.

Between the years 1974 and 1979, it increased by 53 percent. In the same period, rates went up by 287 percent in the Arctic Slope Region, 62 percent in Calista, 113 percent in Cook Inlet and 50 percent in Sealaska Regions.

Conversely, rates went down by 7 percent in the Ahtna Region, down 36 percent in Bering Straits, down 10 percent in Bristol Bay, down 60 percent in Chugach, down 15 percent in Doyon and down 6 percent in Koniag. What this means is that between 1970-1974, there were a certain number of Alaska Native suicides in every region (Aleut region was not reported) and the numbers above represent either an increase or decrease by region in the following five years.

The average age was 22.5 — almost equal for male and female, 78 percent were unemployed, many were not married and not involved in their culture. Unemployment was due to lack of a high school diploma, lack of an occupation and alcohol abuse. Most of the men used violent methods (mixing drugs, gunshot or stabbings) while most women used a drug overdose. 86 percent of all suicides were alcohol related which is a number higher than other Native American tribes.

The four main causes seem to have been: 1) recent failure; 2) recent loss; 3) lack of control over things in one's life and 4) failure of open communications. All this includes arguments, marital problems, someone close dying or leaving a relationship or

an overall feeling of helplessness. Alcohol made it easier but was not necessarily the immediate cause. Those reasons were much deeper and personal.

These thoughts are pretty heavy for any time of day, much less 2:30 in the morning. I began to think how successful my region is doing today in many areas, including business as well as its avant-garde Spirit Program (Inupiat Ilitqusait). I mentally compared it to other Alaska Native regions and how well they are doing also. So how does all of that apparent success still allow so many lives to continue to slip away from us so often?

Bad news travels fast. Even though I am over 500 miles away from Kotzebue, I immediately hear of suicides that occur in villages to people I might not even know. I often wonder, as perhaps you do, just what any one of us could have said or done to save that life.

I often think that the only time a person really gets a very special turnout from friends and relatives saying how special that person was is after she/he is . . . a time that is in reality too late to say all of those things they should have said when that person was alive and really needed to hear that concern.

Mr. Travis concludes that more social intervention is needed, much I suspect like putting the elements of the Spirit Program of the NANA region into practice. The only conclusion that I question in his study is that he feels the more an Inupiat is educated, the more likely she/he is going to commit suicide.

I strongly disagree with this and say on the contrary that the more a person learns about the world around him and takes on the responsibility for his own life, the better he or she will be prepared to cope with new problems.

It is precisely this weaving of traditional and modern lifestyles and values into one's life that will prepare one best to take his place in our changing society.

If this theme of suicide is of a special concern in your life or in the life of someone close to you, you might want to think about coming and taking part in the conference to be held in Anchorage on suicide by the American Association of Suicidology from May 2-5, 1984. This is just two weeks before the International Circumpolar Health Conference will begin also in Anchorage.

The loss of someone we love is never easy. I lost my parents when I was around six years old and spent many lonely years in a boarding school away from family and friends. Death does, though, have special qualities and one of them is to bring the living closer together.

If we are going to do more than just be successful business corporations and board members we have to take some hard

(Continued on Page Eighteen)

Suicide in Arctic

(Continued from Page Fourteen)

looks at the society we are building and leaving to our children.

After it is all over and it is our turn to die, the highest compliment those who follow us can give us will not be in terms of what we built or owned but rather in who we were and what we did for our fellowmen. The

ability to make this world a little better, to spread a little hope and just to care about each other does not take any special education or training and can begin right now as you read this. All it takes are ordinary human beings like you and me who care and are not afraid to try.