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THE Mukluk Telegraph

THE OFFICIAL QUARTERLY NEWSPAPER FOR THE CUSTOMER-OWNERS OF THE ALASKA NATIVE TRIBAL HEALTH CONSORTIUM

JULY-SEPTEMBER 2011

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Connecting Care

Joel
Stewart

BY JOSH NIVA

To say that it is challenging to provide health care in a state with the diversity, weather patterns and area of Alaska is a bit of an understatement. That's like saying Joel Stewart's job at Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium is complex.

"It's very, very, very complex," Stewart said with a smile while discussing his work directing Alaska Native Medical Center's Care Circle Initiative. Stewart manages the improvements of clinical care coordination between regional hospitals and ANMC.

SEE **CONNECTING CARE**, PAGE 5 ►

PHOTO BY TODD HENRY

Healthy Alaska Natives Foundation delivers big gifts, bigger impact

BY JOSH NIVA

The Healthy Alaska Natives Foundation (HANF) recently distributed \$97,500 in funds to programs that improve the health and wellbeing of Alaska Natives, including directing nearly \$50,000 in gifts to impact Alaska’s children.

HANF gave more than \$40,000 to Alaska Native Medical Center’s (ANMC) Pediatrics department: \$25,000 for renovations to improve patient and family comfort, another \$10,000 to develop an Imagination Library program to advance literacy for Alaska Native children, and \$5,000 to support an art therapy program.

HANF also gave \$6,425 to develop Camp Coho II, a summer camp which will support Alaska Native children who have lost loved ones to traumatic events such as suicide. The camp is inspired by Camp Coho, the successful grief camp model which annually serves Alaska Native children who have lost loved ones to cancer. Another \$808 was directed to ANMC’s Operating Room to purchase toys for young sedation clinic patients.

Learn more about the Healthy Alaska Natives Foundation or give a gift by visiting:
www.inspiringgoodhealth.org

“It’s always exciting to improve the programs that are doing such impactful work around Alaska and making a difference for Alaska Natives,” said Carrie Brown, HANF Director. “Gifts that improve the lives of young Alaska Natives are especially moving. When our youth have positive influences and healthy environments, all of our communities and lives improve.”

Other notable gifts from HANF’s recent donation distribution include: \$10,000 to develop a statewide suicide prevention media campaign; \$7,807 to fund a documentary on suicide in Western Alaska; \$5,000 to fund a methamphetamine and suicide prevention campaign in the North Slope region; \$2,210 to ANMC’s Emergency Department for patient clothing needs; and \$2,005 to produce a “Traditional Foods, Contemporary Chef” program, which will promote nutrient-dense food consumption.

HANF was established in 2007 to coincide with the 10th anniversary of the creation of ANTHC to raise awareness and funding to further ANTHC’s vision that Alaska Native people are the healthiest people in the world. In 2010, HANF distributed \$160,000. HANF is most visible at its annual Raven’s Ball in Anchorage. March’s black-tie event raised \$325,000 for HANF, up from \$222,000 in 2010. Brown wants to make equal gains in philanthropy by developing a statewide campaign for individuals and corporations.

“These are great first steps,” said Brown. “But my big goal is sustainable, ongoing fundraising that makes a real difference.” •

Josh Niva is Communications Manager at the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium.

MISSION

Providing the highest quality health services in partnership with our people and the Alaska Tribal Health System

VISION

Alaska Natives are the healthiest people in the world

VALUES

- Achieving excellence
- Native self-determination
- Treat with respect and integrity
- Health and wellness
- Compassion

VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

This Issue’s Question:

Last issue, we asked you what you thought of the Mukluk Telegraph. Thank you for sharing! Here are some of your responses.

“Good job. Keep it going.”
– Ernest, Seattle

“I love reading what’s going on in health care in different parts of Alaska.”
– Doreen, Anchor Point

“It’s a very valuable way to get health news and content to everyone.”
– Diana, Anchorage

“It is good and helpful.”
– Nona, Glennallen

“I wish there were a couple more pages.”
– John, Tununak

“I learn a lot from you.”
– Cheryl, Anchorage

“I think you are doing a fine job.”
– Ron, Sitka

“It would be nice to see an ongoing section interviewing Alaska Native elders.”
– Libby, Juneau

THE MUKLUK TELEGRAPH

The Mukluk Telegraph is the official newspaper of the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium.

The paper is published quarterly and distributed at no charge to customer-owners, employees and partners of ANTHC statewide.

HOW ARE WE DOING?

Have a suggestion or a compliment for the Mukluk Telegraph?

We would love to hear from you. E-mail the ANTHC Marketing Department at marketing@anthc.org.

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The Mukluk Telegraph is available online at www.anthc.org/abt/news.

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Quitting tobacco is hard. Not quitting is hard on your body.

BY CAROLINE CREMO RENNER

Tobacco use is the leading cause of preventable death across the globe and is estimated to kill more than 5 million people annually. If current rates continue, by 2030 tobacco use will cause more than 8 million deaths per year. In Alaska, the statistics are equally alarming.

Tobacco use rates among Alaska Native youth and adults are well above those of other races. About 20 percent of Americans and non-Alaska Native people smoke; Alaska Native people smoke at twice that rate, 41 percent, a level that hasn’t gone down since the State of Alaska started tracking it in the early 1990s. Alaska’s overall adult spit tobacco use rate is 4 percent, but the rate among Alaska Native adults is nearly three times higher at 11 percent.

Among Alaska youth in grades 9-12, similar patterns emerge. When asked if they smoked in the last 30 days, non-Alaska Native youth say yes 13 percent of the time, American youth say yes 20 percent of the time, and Alaska Native youth say yes 32 percent of the time. The Alaska Native youth smoking rates are going down, but there’s still a big gap between the rates.



Alaska is a unique state in many ways and tobacco use is one of those unique aspects of life here that many people are working hard to change. There are free tobacco quit programs available in clinics and hospitals, by phone, and in rural communities around Alaska with staff that are extremely well-trained to help anyone.

Today is the perfect time to quit. Quite possibly, it will be a life-changing moment that impacts

more than just the person who quits – it also impacts family, friends and those who see them modeling tobacco use behavior as normal in their community.

Once you’ve decided what will motivate you, there are professionals and resources that can help you all around Alaska. They can support you to sustain your motivation, help you stay on track, and even provide you the right kind of medications that will improve your chances of staying quit. And the help is free.

Often people who are able to quit for one hour, one day, one

year, or 40 years will tell you that quitting tobacco was the hardest thing they’ve ever done. Though the process of quitting might be difficult, think about one or many of the reasons that you’ve decided to quit: perhaps for your health or for your family. Staying focused on what motivates you and getting the right support could prove the key to the tobacco-free lifestyle many current users are seeking. •

Caroline Cremo Renner, Masters Degree in Public Health, Certified Tobacco Treatment Specialist by the Mayo Clinic Medical School, is the Nicotine Research Program Manager at the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium.

Ready to quit using tobacco?

Ready to encourage a loved one or friend to quit? Take advantage of the free resources available statewide.

Statewide

Alaska Tobacco Quit Line
1-800-Quit-Now
Web: www.alaskatca.org

Anchorage

Alaska Native Medical Center
907-729-4343

Southcentral Foundation
907-729-2689

Bethel

Yukon-Kuskokwim Health Corporation
1-800-478-3321 or
907-543-6312

Dillingham

Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation
1-800-478-5201 ext 6320

Fairbanks

Tanana Chiefs Conference
907-451-6682 ext 3779

Haines

SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium
907-766-6315

Juneau

SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium
907-364-4440

Bartlett Regional Hospital
907-796-8920 or 796-8422

Kenai

Kenaitze Indian Tribe
907-355-2148

Kodiak

Kodiak Area Native Association
907-486-9800

Kotzebue

Manilaq Association
1-800-478-3312

Sitka

SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium
1-800-966-8875

Wrangell

Alaska Island Community Services
907-874-2373

Thank YOU!

Thank you to all who participated in the Mukluk Telegraph reader survey. Your voice will help us shape the Mukluk Telegraph moving forward and make it a better publication.

Survey drawing winners are:
First prize, \$50 Visa gift card:
Debra Heard, Fairbanks

Two second prizes,
\$25 Regal Cinema gift cards:
Julien Naylor, Sitka,
and Clifford Hunter, Bethel.

Thank you to everyone for your voice and your time! And thanks for reading the Mukluk Telegraph.



THE

Mukluk Telegraph

Aspiring Hiring

BY JOSH NIVA

Every Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) employee plays a role in achieving the vision that Alaska Natives are the healthiest people in the world. But for the vision to become reality, Alaska Natives must play critical roles within ANTHC. Alaska Native hire creates a culture of pride and self-ownership in ANTHC for all employees and creates a comfortable and familiar environment for ANTHC’s patients and partners.

“There’s a culture at ANTHC that really encourages Alaska Native hire,” explained Melanie Morris, one of 17 Alaska Natives in ANTHC’s Human Resources department. In four years, Morris has risen from entry level medical clerk to HR Advisor, and ANTHC has provided education and opportunities to help her advance even further. “This company has great values,” she said, “and I’m proud to be a part of it.”

“Alaska Native hire is a positive for our company and a positive for our people,” added Jason Hart, who has steadily advanced to his current HR position as Supervisor of Benefits.

When Alaska Natives are employed and promoted at ANTHC, it creates a positive ripple effect around Alaska. A great career

Online

Looking to join the powerful and diverse work at ANTHC? Know someone who is? Find a career at ANTHC today by visiting:
www.anthc.org/alljobs.cfm

embodies self-determination, leads to socio-economic improvements for Alaska Native families today and for future generations, and ultimately establishes better health for all Alaska Natives.

That’s why ANTHC offers education, mentoring and career planning for Alaska Natives. It has also engaged in a pilot program to study why Alaska Native hires stay at, and even leave, so it can better recruit and retain employees.

“Alaska Natives are the reason ANTHC exists, so Alaska Native hire and promotion has to be something that we breathe,” explained Doug Miller, ANTHC Human Resources Director. “And where there’s focus, there’s been success.”

Obviously, there’s still work to do: on hiring and on ANTHC’s vision. Playing a critical role in achieving both makes working at ANTHC special.

“Helping Alaska Natives,” said Hart, “that’s the best part of the job.” •



PHOTO BY TODD HENRY

Human Resources Advisor Melanie Morris, left, and Supervisor of Benefits Jason Hart are just two Alaska Natives in ANTHC’s diverse HR Department, which recruits, hires and promotes ANTHC employees.

ANTHC names Báez new behavioral health director

The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) recently named Laura Báez Director of Behavioral Health for its Division of Community Health Services.

Báez will oversee initiatives to promote behavioral health capacity development and service enhancements through the Alaska Tribal Health system. This work includes the Behavioral Health Aide program, prevention, intervention and post-vention initiatives such as substance abuse prevention and capacity building, suicide and crisis response, and domestic violence prevention. Báez will also serve as a behavioral health liaison to various regional organizations, state and federal agencies.

“Laura brings a tremendous wealth of knowledge about behavioral health and the



Laura Báez

Alaska Tribal Health system to ANTHC,” said Dr. Jay Butler, Senior Director of the Division of Community Health Services. “Her experience and broad knowledge of health services and Alaska Native issues are a significant benefit to our team.”

Prior to joining ANTHC, Báez worked at the Yukon Kuskokwim Health Corporation for 15 years, serving most recently as Behavioral Health Administrator. Prior to moving to Bethel, Báez worked in a variety of behavioral health settings in Dallas, Texas. She has more than 19 years experience in urban and rural behavioral health, including outpatient, inpatient, residential, school-based and hospital emergency, as well extensive experience serving child, adolescent, adult and developmentally disabled populations. She also served as the Chair of the Alaska Tribal Behavioral Health Director Committee for two years and managed a Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) child and adolescent six-year System of Care implementation grant in the Yukon Kuskokwim region. •

CONNECTING CARE, FROM PAGE 1 ▶

Basically, that means he oversees the continued process improvements regarding the logistics of travel for Alaska Native patients – this covers every step from a patient’s referral to safely arriving at ANMC to returning home with all their necessary medical notes and prescriptions.

Sound daunting? Stewart admits it is, while adding that it’s exciting to be on the frontline of improving health care for Alaska Natives. In his seven months heading Care Circle, he and ANTHC’s medical, customer service and operations staff have made significant strides in improving overall care for traveling patients.

Patients are now informed before they even leave their communities – ANMC travel information is available to all regions and accessible online; information includes a travel video, places to record names, phone numbers and appointment times, and answers to frequently asked travel and accommodation questions. When patients arrive in Anchorage, they have access to the 24-hour shuttle service between ANMC and the Ted Stevens International Airport.

ANMC’s Associate Vice President Leatha Merculieff has helped make sweeping improvements to all phases of customer experience. There’ve been upgrades at Quiana House, efficiencies in customer complaint resolution, increased value and removed restrictions on cafeteria meal card purchases, and enhanced coordination in patient advocates’ work. Stewart’s team is even developing strategies to help patients make their scheduled appointments.

And to improve handoff and communication for patients returning home, ANMC discharge coordinators make daily calls to case managers around the state.

“The improvements have been tremendous,” explained MaryAnn Harris, a program manager for the case managers at Maniilaq Association. “Before when our patients left us, they were a lost population – we would just wait to hear from them. We can manage their care much better. It’s become a great continuum of care.”

Of course, travel coordination in Alaska can be a fragile process: one flight delay due to weather could mean a missed appointment. One dropped connection and a patient can feel lost. That’s why communication is critical to the success of Care Circle’s work.

“Good communication ensures that patients receive the service and care they need when they come to ANMC,” Stewart said. “But that communication is a shared responsibility. That’s why we work closely with everyone, from the community health aides and case managers to ANMC’s physicians, hospital leadership and even our shuttle drivers.”

Stewart’s partners around Alaska agree. “The big change has been improved communication – without this communication, it’s just chaos,” said Marlene Smith, a registered nurse and case manager at Maniilaq Association.



PHOTO BY TODD HENRY

Above: Joel Stewart at work.



PHOTO BY JOSH NIVA

Left: Maniilaq Association’s Marlene Smith, nurse and case manager, and MaryAnn Harris, program manager for case managers, recently visited ANTHC.

Harris added: “We didn’t even have contact people before. Now we have Joel; we have go to people.”

And those “go to people” extend beyond Stewart. His Care Circle efforts are supported by ANTHC leaders like ANMC Hospital Administrator Gary Shaw, ANMC Senior Executive Liaison Michelle Anderson, ANMC’s Associate Vice President Leatha Merculieff, DEHE Director Steve Weaver, DCHS Director Dr. Jay Butler, and Chief Strategic Planning and Quality Officer Deborah Smith, who also work with statewide partners to improve communication, logistics, and ultimately health care for Alaska Natives.

Strengthening relationships also comes in putting faces with voices and names. Stewart and ANTHC leaders travel often to discuss the successes and challenges of health care in each unique region, as well as receive feedback from tribal health leaders on Care Circle and

ANTHC’s work. Since January, the group has met with representatives from Tanana Chiefs Conference, SouthEast Alaska Regional Health Consortium, Norton Sound Health Corporation, Chugachmiut, Maniilaq, and the Kodiak Area Native Association.

“We’re working hard to integrate improvements in all aspects of patient travel,” Stewart said, “and building relationships with our tribal health care partners around the state is really going to be the key to Care Circle’s success, and to achieving ANTHC’s mission of delivering the highest quality health services to Alaska Natives.” •

Josh Niva is Communications Manager with the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium. He can be reached at (907) 729-1899 or jjniva@anthc.org.

Online

Download the ANMC Travel Packet, watch the “Traveling to ANMC” video, and learn more about Care Circle’s travel work by visiting www.anthctoday.org/hospital/Travel.html

FIVE MINUTES WITH ...

ANMC’s Hospital Administrator Gary Shaw

Gary Shaw is Senior Vice President and Administrator of the hospital at Alaska Native Medical Center (ANMC). Shaw joined ANMC in May 2011, but this isn’t his first stint in Alaska. As a boy, Shaw lived in Anchorage from 1957-1969, when his father ran a bush pilot operation. After 30 years in health care around the world – in public health, in the military, in regional health care, and in busy urban environments – Shaw has returned. He was most recently vice president of operations at Bayhealth Medical Center in Dover, Delaware, where he worked with a team that led a staff of 2,900 employees and gross revenue of \$900 million.

INTERVIEW BY JOSH NIVA

MUKLUK TELEGRAPH: *What are some of your favorite memories of your Alaska childhood?*

GARY SHAW: We used to fly to Big Lake in a Grumman Goose, land on the lake and catch trout, then fly home and have fresh fish for dinner and I remember flying over Anchorage after the (1964) earthquake and seeing everything wadded up and shredded, almost like torn paper.

MT: *So many years later, what drew you back to Alaska and to ANMC?*

GS: To me, Alaska has always been one of those places that once you’ve been there, you never get it out of your blood. And what drew me to the position was the richness and complexity of the work at ANMC and ANTHC, and how it matched my skill set. The populations of people. The Level II Trauma work. The significance of receiving Magnet designation and the important role of nurses at ANMC. The public health model that reduces emergency department visits and keeps people who live outside of the major cities healthy. I really wanted to be a part of an organization with that type of vision: that Alaska Natives are the healthiest people in the world. It’s an honor to lead the organization to achieve that mission.

MT: *What’s your vision for the future of ANMC?*

GS: Health care is changing, so ANMC also has to be positioned as a leader in customer service and quality. I want to make sure that Alaska Natives who have the opportunities to choose their health care choose us. I want to make sure that the resources stay intact. And I want to keep the cost structure low and generate enough revenue so we can reinvest in ourselves and the ANTHC board of directors can deliver on its vision.

Another critical piece to our work will be health care reform, which is changing the landscape on how we provide services. We need to keep focused on our mission while looking at other opportunities to see how we can deliver health care in partnership with others.

MT: *Talk about your 30-plus years in health care and the many positions you’ve held.*

GS: I started out in health care in the Navy as a hospital corpsman. My love for health care evolved from being trained as a medic to provide independent care to those who needed it. I wanted to move forward in public health and attended the Navy public health school. I was commissioned at the six year mark to be an environmental health officer and the passion just continued from there.

And I have worn every hat there is in a hospital, from environmental services — which means mopping floors and emptying trash and working with linen — to medical records and medical clinics. In the Navy, I worked as a medic in a trauma center all the way through to administration. I believe that people respect leadership that’s done what they’re being asked to do and I pride myself on knowing what’s going on day-to-day in a hospital. I know that they’re working hard and doing worthwhile work. I want to reinforce that to them, that they are what make the hospital successful. •



Gary Shaw

**Powerful messages.
Lifesaving impact.**

Suicide is a sensitive matter, but Alaska’s youth are bringing this conversation to the forefront. They are leading, educating, healing and saving lives.

Alaska Association of Student Governments (AASG) is proud to announce the top finishers in its Suicide Prevention Media Contest. More than 30 Alaska student entries from Barrow to Klawock, Cordova to Bethel, Tri-Valley to Manokotak entered.

1st Place
“Suicide Prevention” by Jaden Nethercall, Barrow, Alaska

2nd Place
“Live Happy” by Stephanie Sison, Cordova, Alaska

3rd Place (tied)
“If Only it Were This Easy” by Michael White, Bethel, Alaska

3rd Place (tied)
“Hang in There” by Sophie Clark, Klawock, Alaska

Scan the QR Code to view the top media contest submissions and entrants. Watch for public service announcements of the top finishers airing on GCI cable channels this summer. For more information on AASG’s suicide prevention campaign, visit <http://aasg.org>.

Delivering lessons in healthy lifestyles leads to healthy Alaskans

BY ANTHC DIABETES OUTREACH PROGRAM

With one in three American children developing diabetes, sometimes clever packaging can make a big difference for Alaska parents working to keep their children healthy. Sometimes that can be as simple as smearing red apple slices (smiles) in peanut butter and topping them with a few marshmallows (teeth). Suddenly an apple snack looks pretty attractive to a youngster.

Healthy living is a family affair, which is why the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) hosts events like We Can in Anchorage and teamed with Bristol Bay Area Health Corporation Diabetes Program recently to host Healthy and Happy: Having Fun with Food and Fitness in Dillingham. Similar programs have taken place in Metlakatla, all aimed at helping families learn about healthy foods and proper portion sizes, as well as the benefits of physical activity. That awareness is critical for all Alaskans in the fight against diabetes.

Online
For more information about diabetes outreach and education around Alaska, contact Denise Ramp at (907) 729-3925, dbramp@anthc.org, or visit: www.anthc.org/anmc/services/diabetes

“Most people don’t realize the serious impact that food has on our health — we talk about it all the time, it’s constantly in the news, yet many people don’t choose to eat healthy or be physically active,” explained Angela Manderfeld, ANTHC’s Diabetes Nutrition Consultant.

Manderfeld added: “We want to help kids start healthy habits when they are young, so it’s important that we get the message out to them and their parents.”

More than 4,000 Alaska Natives suffer from diabetes, with 98 percent of those having type 2 diabetes related to being overweight or obese long term. And despite 80 percent of Alaska children who are physically active at least 60 minutes per day, a 2009 report noted that 12 percent of school-aged Alaska youth are overweight or obese. In fact, more Alaska children are entering kindergarten overweight or obese and a quarter of Alaska’s children watches television or uses a computer for more than three hours a day.

The target audience of these events is youngsters 3-12, but parents also have an opportunity to learn. Participants were surprised that a 24-ounce bottle of Mountain Dew is equivalent to drinking 31 sugar cubes, and that each day children should eat two hand-



ANTHC Diabetes Outreach Program’s Denise Ramp, left, and Angela Manderfeld deliver lessons in healthy lifestyles to Alaskans at fun and informative events around the state.

sized portions of vegetables, a fistful of starch, and a palm-sized amount of meat at dinner.

“We eat lots of food because it tastes good, but the problem is we don’t burn all the extra calories we eat,” said Denise Ramp, Diabetes Outreach Coordinator at ANTHC. “That extra food energy becomes fat which leads to diabetes and high cholesterol.”

That’s why fitness is also stressed, as well as the importance of eating as a family, which goes beyond health. When families eat together, children learn food and mealtime traditions, as well as family and cultural values. Studies have proven that children who eat with their families are more secure and teenagers are less likely to smoke, drink alcohol and use drugs.

“Parents must be the role models,” Manderfeld said, “and for healthy changes to happen, it has to come as a whole family.” •

A Balanced Plate For Alaska’s Kids

A traditional Alaska Native diet is a perfect way to a healthy diet for children and a great way to prevent diabetes. Another way to help encourage better eating habits is to think of a plate in four parts, each part represented by a handful of food.

Two parts should be non-starchy vegetables (vegetables don’t have to be fresh; canned or frozen work fine).

One part should be grains, beans and starchy vegetables.

And one part should be lean protein, like Alaska seafood, moose or caribou.

Want more? Add a slice of apple or a half cup of canned fruit.

Wash the meal down with milk and you have a balanced, and healthy, meal.

–Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium Diabetes Outreach

British diplomat, respected doctor learns about ANTHC’s work

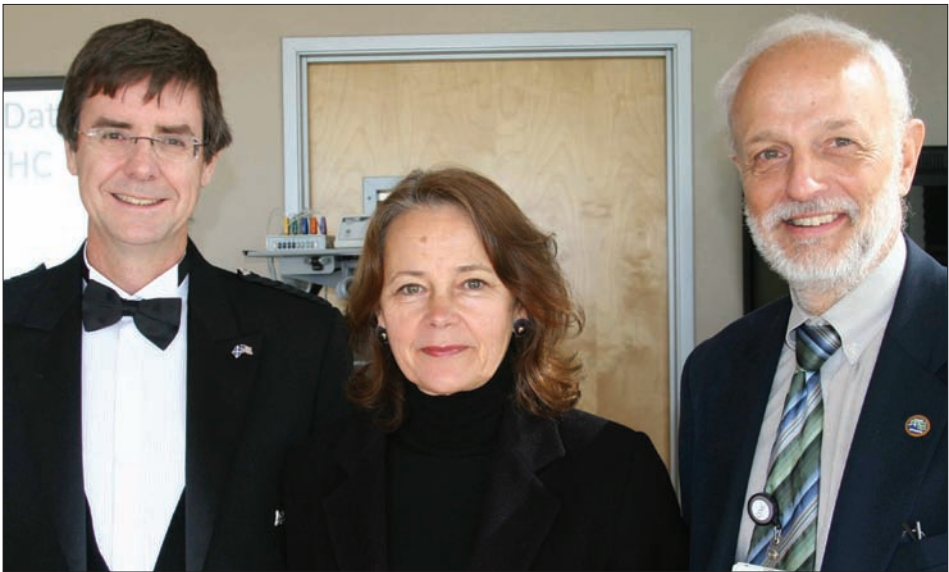
BY JOSH NIVA

Dr. Julia Dunne, also known as Lady Sheinwald the wife of British ambassador Sir Nigel Sheinwald, visited Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium (ANTHC) in June to learn about the unique challenges and successes of health care in Alaska.

Dr. Dunne’s visit was hosted by ANTHC Chief Information Officer Stewart Ferguson, who presented about AFHCAN and telemedicine technology, and ANTHC’s Carol Odinzoff, who presented on ANTHC’s Community Health

Aides Program. ANMC hospital administrator Gary Shaw and longtime ANMC physician Dr. Tom Nighswander also attended the meeting. After a presentation at ANTHC, the group toured the ANMC hospital area.

Dr. Dunne is a respected international doctor who has recently conducted regulatory work in the U.S. She was joined by Mary Gilbert, Acting British Consul General in San Francisco, and Diddy R.M.Hitchins, PhD MBE, the British Honorary Consul for Alaska. •



Dr. Julia Dunne, center, visits with ANTHC’s Chief Information Officer Stewart Ferguson, left, and Dr. Tom Nighswander during her recent visit to Anchorage.

Healing Circle supports Alaska Natives recovering from cancer

BY CHRISTINE DECOURTNEY

When someone is diagnosed with cancer, a long and difficult journey begins. Lots of appointments, information, questions and, often, fear about what will happen. Cancer isn’t just the patient’s illness: it’s the whole family’s illness. Families around Alaska know that well – cancer is the leading cause of death among Alaska Native people.

Cancer support groups provide a way for cancer patients and families to gather with people who truly understand – other people with cancer. However, standard support groups don’t take in the cultural ways and traditions of the Alaska Native people who may not easily share their stories and concerns.

The Alaska Native Medical Center (ANMC) Healing Circle for Alaska Native cancer patients and families, a support group sponsored by

ANMC’s Oncology Clinic, meets weekly in Anchorage. People living outside Anchorage join in by telephone and video teleconferencing through village clinics and regional hospitals. Healing Circle often has participants check in from Dillingham and Nome, as well as smaller communities like Kipnuk.

Healing Circle began in 2007 and provides an opportunity for cancer survivors to share experiences and participate in programs that include nutrition, available resources, arts and crafts, music, wellness, spirituality and other topics suggested by survivors.

Someone diagnosed with cancer may have a large, supportive family and a strong, understanding health care team, but that support isn’t the same as the kind that comes from other cancer survivors. When someone feels alone in their cancer journey, it’s mutual

Online

The Healing Circle for Alaska Native cancer patients meets from 4-5:30 p.m. Thursdays at the Alaska Native Medical Center in Anchorage. People outside Anchorage can participate over the phone or via video teleconferencing. Learn how to connect and get more information by contacting **Beth Conrad** at (907) 729-1179 or **econrad@anthc.org**, or **Karen Morgan** at (907) 729-4491 or **kmmorgan@anthc.org**.

Learn more about ANTHC’s Cancer Program by emailing **cancer@anthc.org** or visiting: **www.anthc.org/chs/crs/cancer**

support that allows them to feel connected.

“This is the most wonderful cancer support group I have attended – I feel I belong here and I feel that everything I need for support is here,” said Margaret Parker, a regular at recent meetings. “The facilitators give their best and I learn so much from the other cancer survivors. It keeps us going and gives us hope.”

Cancer survivor John Evan from Pilot Station added: “The group is a big help. Being away from home, I have this group to go to and have someone to listen to me instead of feeling alone and lost.”

Healing Circle dynamics change from meeting to meeting. The group can include cancer patients whose ages range from 20 to 70-plus, newly diagnosed patients to long-term survivors, and even families and friends of people diagnosed with cancer who want to better understand how to best help. While the format may change, there’s always an opportunity to share stories. •

Christine DeCourtney is the Cancer Program Planning and Development Manager at the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium.



From left, Margaret Parker, Elizabeth Clement and John Evan take a break from activities during a recent Healing Circle support group meeting for Alaska Native cancer survivors.