

American Indian Cancer Foundation Survivor Story

Written by Bob Burlison (Choctaw)

My name is Bob Burlison and I am 65 years old and a Choctaw. I am of the Ahe Apat Okla, Northern District of the Choctaw people. I have been a Physician Assistant for the past 42 years. Practicing Emergency Medicine with the Indian Health Service, private sector and currently with the Choctaw Nation Health Service Administration.

I graduated from the Community Health Medic Training program, a Physician Assistant program funded through the Indian Health Service and administered by the University of New Mexico School of Medicine. The program was closed as part of Reagan's Administration in 1983. I trained at Gallup, NM and did my preceptorship at Shiprock, NM. I passed my national boards in 1981 and was certified as a Physician Assistant.

My ties to my tribe were through my grandmother, Bazada Hancock Martin, who lived in Stigler, OK. Grandma was a fullblood Choctaw and spoke the language. She learned English when she went to Wheelock Boarding School and then studied at Haskell Institute in Lawrence, Kansas. However, missionaries convinced my grandfather that if their children learned Choctaw, they would be "held back" in school. He decided that they would not teach their children Choctaw so that they could be successful, and my mother and her brothers and sisters did not learn Choctaw.

I was introduced to traditional Choctaw culture by my future sister-in-law's family, whose elders were all fullblood Choctaw speakers. They used both the Indian Hospital at Tali-hina as well as the Choctaw doctors, or Alikchi. I was fortunate to speak with some of these men, as well as Cherokee and Mvscogee doctors, and learned some of the overall principles of how Indians understand health and balance.

Much like the medicine wheel's teachings, the people of the south believe that we have shells, or layers of power, that surround us. They are our physical health, spiritual health, social health, mental health and societal health, and an unbalance in any of these can cause all the layers of protection to fall in on us, and disease can enter. So it was imperative that our ancestors lived in a certain way to maintain that balance, and if interrupted, that balance must be restored so that we would be healthy again. This went beyond just taking a curative for disease. One must be in balance so that disease does not immediately reenter our bodies.

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The most powerful part of curative medicine was the prayer the Alikchi said over their medicine. Our Creator has put a certain amount of power in this world, and those who know how to use it can use it either to bring health or harm. Alikchi I have spoken to say that they are nothing more than a vessel the Creator uses, and that their breath comes from the Creator and when spoken or blown over a medicine give it power. Allopathic medicine recognizes the power providers have to influence the course of a patient's treatment. But they do not believe there is any special power of medicine other than it's tested effectiveness.

I remembered in training an old Diné traditional doctor who had tuberculosis, with a fistula that had to be cleaned daily. As a PA student, that job fell to me. I remember one day while I was getting things ready to clean the area, he started to laugh. I asked him what was so funny, and he said, "Here I am, I have healed people for years, and now I can't even heal myself." I thought about that when, twenty-six years later, I sat in a surgeon's office in Tulsa and was told that I had colon cancer. I knew the signs and symptoms. But I had never had any of them. The only warning was a low normal red blood cell count that concerned my doctor at Talihina. I was numb. I could only think that I would have to wait until the surgery was done so that I would know what likely would happen next. And like Choctaws of old, as happens in all people, I took stock of the balance in my life.

I was fortunate when I went for the post-operative appointment and found that they had removed all the cancer. None outside the wall of the colon, none in the vessels, nerves or lymph nodes. I would need no radiation, no chemotherapy. Things were great until six months later when, on a routine PET scan, a new lesion was noted near my spine. I was told this was unrelated to my colon cancer, that this was something new. All I could think about was a bone cancer. I knew the usual course of things. Intractable pain, paralysis, bedsores, repeated infection- all the worst things that could happen. My mind and my spirit were definitely out of balance. My overwhelming concern was that I could not be that kind of burden to my family and resolved to work for as long as I could to save money for my wife, and then when I could work no more, had a detailed plan on how and where I would end my life so that I would not be a burden. Fortunately, that second scare was not cancer, but a benign nerve sheath tumor that they removed. I have a burning sensation in my right lower leg but have been free of cancer now for over 16 years. I am quite happy with that tradeoff.

I have learned that balance is important. I have continued to study the history and culture of my people. I work with my people and live in the Choctaw Nation. I have met others like me and have had the opportunities to participate in stomp dances in my Nation as well as with the Chickasaw, Yuchi, Mvskogee and Cherokee people.

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I joined Boiling Springs Baptist Church, a member of the Choctaw-Chickasaw Baptist Association and one of the original 16 Baptist churches in our Nation. The Choctaw churches in our Nation were the only place we as Choctaw could meet after statehood and speak Choctaw. The churches took the place of our town governments. We were seated in church the way we sat in council. The church grounds were arranged with camp houses around it, much like the stomp grounds. We settled family differences, we planned the year out, we prayed for the sick and fed everyone together, and identified ourselves as members of a certain church to others, just as we had in the traditional towns of old. Remnants of the old culture can still be seen there today.

And I still recognize the old medicine. I wear protection I got from a Yuchi doctor. I sometimes talk about traditional medicine and make referrals with my patients. I use traditional doctors for my family. And I love living among my people; they know me as Choctaw, and I feel comfortable and safe among them. My balance is restored. Chahta sia hoke.



The American Indian Cancer Foundation is deeply grateful to Bob for the wonderful and sacred advocacy, support, and love he shares with the community.

