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### FROM THE EDITOR IN CHIEF

#### Health of the First Americans

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Today, the place along Lake Michigan I call home sits on ancestral lands of Indigenous peoples, including the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi nations.<sup>1</sup>

During middle school, I was taught that Indigenous peoples of the Americas first arrived some 13 000 years ago by crossing a land bridge that connected Siberian Asia with Alaska.<sup>2</sup> The history that was imparted to me and my classmates seemed to be a straightforward one: a single wave of southbound migration populated the entire Western Hemisphere. Analyses of ancient DNA have since revealed that there were many complex and unexpected migrations taken by the First Americans.<sup>3</sup> As with much of the past accounted for in textbooks, what has long been told can be oversimplified, incomplete, and wrong.

While in middle and high school, I was not taught about the US government's dispossession of First Americans' land and property and the means by which they nourished their bodies and spirits. This forced impoverishment rendered their age-old agricultural and stewardship practices useless and with no surviving expression, leaving so many Pima and Tohono O'odham Indians dependent on a federal supply of canned and other processed foods of such poor nutritional quality that they now possibly have the highest rates of type 2 diabetes in the world.<sup>4</sup> I was not taught about the Trail of Tears and other forced relocations that led to thousands of deaths<sup>5</sup>; I did not learn about the many treaties signed by Indigenous tribal nations that were violated by the US government.<sup>6</sup> I was not taught that these dispossessions, terminated family lineages, forced dependencies, and betrayals were sources of **transgenerational trauma**, loss, and grief for so many First Americans.

I never understood or appreciated that these nations had thriving cultures before the first Europeans arrived in 1492.<sup>7</sup> It is estimated that in the pre-Columbian era, more than 100 million Indigenous people were living in the Americas, with about 10% living north of the Rio Grande river.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of the actual population numbers, archaeological evidence reveals the on-the-ground reality of densely populated lands and not, as the 19th-century George Bancroft claimed, "an unproductive waste ... its only inhabitants were a few scattered tribes of feeble barbarians."<sup>9</sup> Indigenous peoples of those times established communities and created cultures that equaled the diversity and richness of those of modern-day societies.<sup>10</sup>

According to the 2010 US Census, 5.2 million people identified as American Indian and Alaska Native.<sup>11</sup> If we simply compare the numbers of Indigenous peoples living in the past and in the present, the well-being of Indigenous peoples would seem to be in great peril. Yet these raw numbers don't tell the full story. Life expectancy of American Indians and Alaska Natives is 5.5 years less than that of the overall US population, as they die at a rate that is 1.1 times higher for heart disease, 3.2 higher for diabetes, and 4.6 times higher for chronic liver disease.<sup>12</sup> American Indian and Alaska Native youth also have the highest suicide rate—2.5 times higher than the national average for young people.<sup>13</sup>

These dismal health statistics are disturbing but wholly predictable in light of the **socioeconomic condition** of Indigenous peoples. For example, the 2017 median household income for American Indians and Alaska Natives was \$40 315 compared to \$57 652 for the country.<sup>14</sup> That disparity translates to almost 6 times as many American Indians and Alaska Natives living in poverty.<sup>14</sup> Only 17% of this population pursue any **post-high school education** compared to 60% of people in the United States as a whole.<sup>15</sup> American Indians and Alaska Natives also have the lowest rate of reported “perfect” attendance among 8th graders.<sup>16</sup> One of the reasons seen as contributing to increased school absenteeism is poor infrastructure, with more than three-quarters of all existing roads on tribal lands that qualify for federal funding being unpaved.<sup>17</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically exposed and further amplified large **health disparities** in our society, as communities of color are suffering and dying at much higher rates. The true toll of this pandemic on Indigenous peoples is still not known because race and ethnicity data either are not collected or are inaccurate—particularly in tribal nations, where data reporting is not required.<sup>18</sup> I hope this issue of the *AMA Journal of Ethics* not only provides readers with some necessary illumination on the health of First Americans and the breadth and depth of Indigenous persons' and communities' strength and resilience, but also serves to draw us together in productive, respectful, and well-informed partnerships.

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