

TSET Better Health Podcast Transcript

Episode 31: Native American Health, Culture and Tobacco

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Summary: “It’s easy to quit,” Ken Allen, a Muscogee Creek, said of tobacco. “I quit every day, probably 20 times. It was just staying quit is the problem.” The Perkins resident finally quit smoking after more than 35 years with help from the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline – and no help from a commercial tobacco industry that markets heavily to Native Americans. Allen shares his long journey toward better health in Episode 31 of the TSET Better Health Podcast, which also includes Aaron Williams, tobacco program coordinator of the Southern Plains Tribal Health Board. Williams offers a wider perspective on commercial tobacco use and cessation among Native Americans in Oklahoma, and how commercial tobacco differs from ceremonial tobacco use and traditions. During the interview, Williams referred to BRFSS, the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, which is the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) phone survey system for learning about rates of health-related risk behaviors and chronic health conditions at national and state levels.

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[Theme music]

James Tyree: Hello and welcome to the TSET Better Health Podcast. This is James Tyree, health communication consultant at TSET.

Dylan Jasna: And I am Dylan Jasna, a TSET health communication manager. I enjoyed co-hosting the podcast a couple of months ago and it’s nice to be back with you, James, and our listeners. You know, the tobacco industry spends billions of dollars nationally each year on deceptive marketing aimed at specific populations, which includes Native Americans.

J. Tyree: That’s right. Today we will hear from a pair of guests who offer terrific insights on tobacco use among Native Americans, and how vaping, smoking or chewing commercial tobacco products differs from ceremonial or traditional tobacco use among Native Americans, and how the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline and tribal-based programs have helped Native Americans in Oklahoma quit tobacco for good. Native American people and cultures are so deeply connected to Oklahoma well before it was a state, so we are happy to share this episode with you.

D. Jasna: Before we hear a personal story from one Oklahoman, let’s get a broader perspective from someone whose job is to help tribal members in our state and region quit tobacco.

Aaron Williams: Good morning. I’m Aaron Williams with the Southern Plain Tribal Health Board. I’m the tobacco program coordinator. I’m a Southern Cheyenne. And I’m glad to be here today.

D. Jasna: The first thing we asked him about are the differences between commercial tobacco.. which is used in cigarettes, cigars, chew and vaping products and ceremonial tobacco which is part of some tribal cultures.

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A. Williams: So ceremonial tobacco is not commercial tobacco, generally. Ideally, there's different types of traditional tobacco or ceremonial tobacco, different tribes have different ways of making it, some grow their own. Some might not even contain tobacco in it.

The plant that we think of tobacco, *Nicotiana rustica*, but it's used in different ways by different tribes, American Indian tribes. We're not a monolith, as they like to say. Each tribe has their own traditions and ceremonial processes and ceremonies that they do. Some tribes use tobacco as an offering. Some tribes use it as, in our tribe, in the Cheyenne, we use it, the men use it for prayer. We use it in a tobacco pipe, a traditional tobacco pipe, and we smoke it. When we say we smoke it, we don't really smoke it. People smoke a cigarette. It's brought into the mouth, but it's not inhaled. And it's brought into the mouth and just let go.

A. Williams: It goes by different names, ceremonial tobacco, traditional tobacco, sacred tobacco. In our tribe we have different tobacco types. Some is like a rolled tobacco or loose tobacco. And it's just used for different stuff. If we're going to go, we need help with one of our ceremonies and we need a helper, we'll go ask somebody, we'll make an offering a tobacco offering for that help. Or if we're need advice. We want somebody to run a sweat, you to run a sweat lodge for us, we'll offer them tobacco. And so it's used these in that ways.

D. Jasna: That's pretty interesting. So how often is ceremonial tobacco is used?

A. Williams: t depends on how often you pray. And that's really the difference between commercial tobacco and ceremonial tobacco, because commercial tobacco is tobacco abuse. Whereas if ceremonial tobacco is used just for prayer only, and you're not going to go pray, some people smoke a pack 20 cigarettes a day. You're not going to go pray 20 times a day. Because usually there's more involved with it when you're offering prayer in your tobacco pipe. So it's used generally during ceremonies during before big events, things like that.

D. Jasna: That's a pretty big difference of use between ceremonial and commercial tobacco. Aaron said the harmful health impacts on Native Americans caused by commercial tobacco are another stark difference.

A. Williams: Commercial tobacco use and prevalence among Oklahoma native Americans is pretty high depending on what source you're looking at. There's a Morbidity Mortality Weekly Report recently came out with a number of about 29, 30% of tobacco use among native Americans. And generally, and I think generally it's about 10 percentage points higher than the root general population. And one of the reasons it's most it's dangerous for

health is native Americans in general have higher comorbidities than in most other populations. We have higher incidences of diabetes, obesity, lung cancer. We have higher incidences of heart disease and stroke. And we all know that smoking plays a huge role in making all those things worse. And I think one of the hardest things for native Americans is that we even marketed to so heavily about tobacco because tobacco was a native American product way before the Europeans got a hold of it. So we've always identified with using tobacco. And I think that's one of the reasons why our rates are probably higher than other populations.

D. Jasna: What are some of the things that you and others at Southern Plains Tribal Health Board are doing to lower tobacco use among tribal members?

A. Williams: Well with the Southern Plains, me and my supervisor, my boss, we work on a grant, the good health and wellness and media country. And one of its core responsibilities is for decreasing tobacco use, increasing cessation rates. And that's kind of what we focus on. We use, we have a grantee that is a tobacco grantee. They work on decreasing tobacco use in their population. Good Health and Wellness and Indian Country, the grant we work on, we call it GHWIC for short. So for GHWIC, we focus on advocating for policy change at the tribal level. Anytime we can help any tribes in our service area, which is Oklahoma, Texas, and Kansas. If they want to make any kind of change, we always provide technical assistance. We have stable policies they could use. We work with other organizations here in the state to help promote changes, advocate for change. And in addition, we also provide training. We provide the Basic Tobacco Intervention Skills training for any of the tribes that have any community health workers or any clinicians, or anybody in the tribe really that wants to learn how to approach somebody and talk to somebody about quitting smoking.

D. Jasna: Commercial tobacco use is falling among Native Americans in Oklahoma as it is for other populations, but newer products are posing new challenges.

A. Williams: From the numbers that I've seen, the different sources, the BRFSS or American Indian Adult Tobacco Survey, or even within our own, some of the surveys we've given out at the Health Board, they have fallen from previous years. In general, I think tobacco use has fallen over the past, well for many years now, but in the past, since vaping and e-cigarettes have become more prevalent use, I think as it plays with a part of the role in tobacco use being, it is what it is today. It's strap probably it's still pretty high. For American Indians, I think it's still about, what is a 30%. It has dropped, but it's not dropping as much as we would like to see it drop.

D. Jasna: Aaron says one statewide resource that has and continues to help tremendously is the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline.

Aa Williams: One of the main things we do push and TSET been a great partner for us. And it's one of the things we do. What we do push is the Quitline as the is statistically speaking the success rate of the Quitline is phenomenal. And it's one of those few things in a state that Oklahoma has really done or done well and did right in providing the funding that they have. And I hope, I really hope, that it continues and that they see that the work

that TSET and the Quitline has done really has improved the health of Oklahomans in general and not just tobacco either. In other areas with the healthy community grants and things like that. We go out in the communities and see what they're doing.

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D. Jasna: It was great hearing from Aaron Williams of the Southern Plains Tribal Health Board, to explain differences between ceremonial and commercial tobacco and why the latter has proven so harmful to Native Americans here in our state and region. He also mentioned how beneficial the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline has been for helping tribal members quit tobacco. Now James, you recently spoke with one such person about his journey.

J. Tyree: I did indeed, and our conversation was so engaging and informative. He recently shared his story with the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline website and now his testimonial is running on TV. His name is ... you know what, let's just let him introduce himself.

Ken Allen: Kenneth Allen, I'm from Perkins, Oklahoma and I'm Muscogee Creek.

I'm a huge family person. And I enjoy being able to spend time with them. Of course, it's more difficult these days with everybody's schedule, and they're older. And Logan, my daughter is in college in Missouri, so I don't get to see her as often as I would like. But we typically will get together and play some golf and enjoy the company. Then my dad, as well, will join us. Probably that and going to church and having, spending time with my church family. I enjoy visiting with them. Natives are communal people and they like to visit. And sometimes we'll sit around after church and just talk for a few hours, just visiting.

J. Tyree: Ken said he started smoking at a young age and that his experience was rather common.

K. Allen: I started in my late teens. I really couldn't pinpoint why. I know my family, my dad and my mother smoked. And I would say I was around a lot of people that did. And that probably had an influence on me starting. I went to a boarding school here in Oklahoma, and they allowed tobacco use for students. Native American boarding school. They have smoking areas. So, probably that's probably when I picked it up.

J. Tyree: As a Muscogee Creek, Ken said he has also used tobacco in a cultural way that differed from his cigarette smoking, and I found that to be very interesting.

K. Allen: I never really used it ceremonially. I used it medicinally. I know it sounds funny to say that tobacco is used medicinally, but if you understand the context from commercial tobacco, if you think commercial tobacco, then you know that tobacco's not used in a healthy manner. But Natives typically will take tobacco, and when they were removed from their lands, they used to make their own tobacco. It wasn't just tobacco. Tobacco was mixed with other plants and herbs, I guess. And it was used for healing and send prayers and stuff. So, I've used it medicinally. And if you use it in a prayerful way, it will cleanse you.

At one time though, the government restricted Natives from using their ceremonies. And in doing so, part of that was taking away their ability to grow and use tobacco. A lot of them turned to commercial tobacco. And that contains chemicals, addictive properties, and everything else, that I think may contribute to why so many Natives continue to use it. But if you use it medicinally or ceremonially, you know, you don't use it, it's not used recreationally or from a dependent standpoint. Just quite the opposite. It's used reverently and respectfully, sparingly actually.

J. Tyree: Ken considered his cigarette smoking, though, the opposite of reverent and sparingly. He wanted to quit over a number of years but, like for so many others, it was tough.

K. Allen: Oh, I smoked over 30 years, 35 plus years actually. And that tells you how addictive it is. I tried quitting quite a few times. But finally I had health issues that contributed to me being, well making up my mind at this, "I'm going to quit." But I had tried to quit a few different times, and wasn't successful. That, and I want to be more active in our church. Natives are spiritual people. And it's kind of hard to be an example if you're running out for a smoke, right after you're talking to the youth or something. So, trying to be an example and be around for my kids is why I quit.

J. Tyree: Ken then said something about quitting tobacco that really stuck in my mind before describing how, exactly, the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline helped him stay quit.

K. Allen: ***It's easy to quit. I quit every day, probably 20 times. It was just staying quit is the problem.*** One thing about tobacco is the nature of it. Just from experience, it doesn't take very long and you start feeling the withdrawals. And it's not just a physical withdrawal. It's a mental withdrawal, where your mind's telling you, "Oh, you got to have another one." I don't know how it alters your mental state, but it does. And it draws you. So, quitting is extremely difficult. You have to change your lifestyle pretty much. You have to change your habits. You have to recognize the things that contribute to you wanting to smoke. And I think when I tried on my own, "I'm just going to put it down." That didn't work. So, the helpline helped me recognize the things that I guess triggered me, or made me want to smoke, and helped me address those things.

The first thing I would typically do is get in a car and light a cigarette. So, I would take a piece of fruit with me. So, when I'd get in the car, I'd eat that fruit, those type things. Just recognizing the triggers, and my habits. Changing my habits, because I had a pattern of when I smoked. Where I smoked before meetings and stuff. Run and grab a cigarette and then go to a meeting. But instead of doing that, I go take a walk or talk to somebody. Just changing your habits is what helped me succeed.

How long has it been since I smoked? Sept. 22, 2018. And it was in the morning.

J. Tyree: And now four years later, how is he doing and feeling?

K. Allen: I feel great. I feel great. Before, you could hear me breathe just sitting there. You could hear me breathe and wheeze, and everything else. And now I'm not as winded, that's for sure. And I'm able to do stuff more, that I would typically just, "Ah, I'm not going to waste my time on. I'm just going to hang out." And I'm golfing more. Out walking more.

Just everything is so much better. Probably the downfall is your sense of taste and smell comes back. In my case, I love to eat now. But there's nothing wrong with it. Yeah. Yeah. I enjoy eating now, and sitting around and visiting, and talking. And just everything is so much better.

J. Tyree: We are so happy to hear that and to know that he is feeling so much better and healthier. In closing, Ken had some great advice for anyone who is thinking of starting – and stopping – the use of any commercial tobacco product.

K. Allen: It's just plain and simply not worth it. The costs far outweigh any benefit that you get from it. And Natives especially. We are people that need to get away from reliance on negative things and negative aspects. The negative perception that public have of minority stuff like that. We need to quit relying on and accepting things that mock our traditions. Part of the way that they market tobacco to Natives, it's in all the smoke shops, it's on all the tribal reserves, and it's so accessible. They lower prices. I mean, just stuff like that for Natives. And they put their pictures on the packaging and stuff. It's just, we need to get away from that negative stigma that people see. It's not good for us.

Well, anyone who wants to quit, be mindful. Be mindful of things that are important to you. And remember that addictive behaviors like tobacco, not just tobacco, but other ones, but mainly stuff like that. It restricts the time that we're focus on what is important to us. Whether it be family or other activities. And I say don't miss out on that type of stuff. It's just not worth it. Time's too short.

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D. Jasna: What an awesome conversation. I really enjoyed his personal story. It was compelling and I really learned a lot. The cool thing is the Oklahoma Tobacco Helpline has helped hundreds of thousands in their efforts to quit tobacco, and each person has their reasons for quitting tobacco and their own unique story, just like Ken.

J. Tyree The Helpline, which can be accessed at okhelpline.com or by calling 1-800-QUIT NOW, has proven to be an important – and totally free – resource for Oklahoma adults of all ages and backgrounds, including Native Americans. Their various cultures have a long history with traditional tobacco, but commercial tobacco use has been devastating for far too many people. That's why it's so good to hear from Ken, who is one of many Native Americans who have proven that it doesn't have to be that way; that tribal members and all Oklahomans can live happy and healthy tobacco-free lives.

D. Jasna: That's it for now and we hope you enjoyed this episode. We want to thank our guests, Aaron Williams and Ken Allen, along with you our listeners, who we always appreciate. Until next time, this is Dylan Jasna ...

J. Tyree: And James Tyree wishing you peace

D. Jasna: And better health.