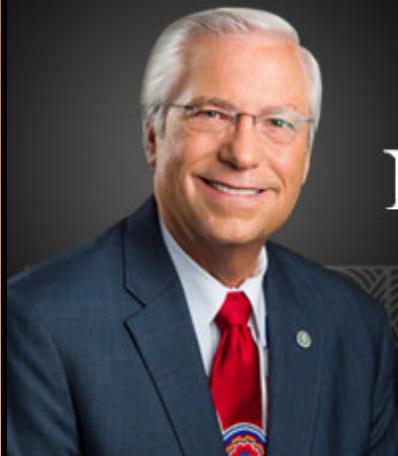


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CHEROKEE NATION®



## Notes from the Chief

*What I'm working on for You*

Osiyo -

At our world-class Cherokee Nation health care centers, we are committed to the well-being of our patients. One of the most progressive initiatives we have today is the Hepatitis C Elimination Project. This is a pilot program to screen patients for the disease, with an end goal to cure all those who test positive. I am proud our tribal health department is doing everything possible to eliminate this debilitating disease many of our Cherokee families face.

We are committed to fighting this disease because it touches so many here in the heart of Indian Country. It is a viral infection that can cause serious liver damage, liver failure and even death. About 3.2 million people in America live with hepatitis C, and 75 percent of them don't even know they are carriers because they are symptom free.

Like with many poor health signifiers, the issue is in even more prominent in our tribal communities. According to the Urban Indian Health Institute, based in Seattle, Indian people are twice as likely to be diagnosed with hepatitis C. Sadly, substance abuse is another contributing factor and critical escalator of our rates with hepatitis C. Opiate abuse is a significant part of the problem, as 73 percent of cases involve intravenous drug use. Unlicensed tattoo artists reusing ink or not sanitizing needles properly are also contributing.

The rates are not good but there is hope, and that's why we are tackling this issue head on. So far in the Cherokee Nation's health system there have been 12,000 patients screened, with 4 percent of women and 7 percent of men testing positive. Of those,

roughly 300 patients have taken the medicine, which is non-invasive and allows patients to continue a normal routine, and have been cured. We have seen a high success rate with treatments, and our hope is to eliminate this disease entirely through Cherokee Nation Health Services. As Native people and as Cherokee Nation citizens, we must keep striving to eliminate hepatitis C from our population.

Staying ahead of the rate of infection requires vigilant testing, screening, treatment and creative strategies to prevent future cases. We are now screening all tribal health department patients over the age of 20, which avoids the problems of determining which patients to test, and will help identify a carrier even if the virus is dormant.

Through diligent counseling and public awareness programs, I am confident we will drive down exposure to this infection. In the past, a positive hepatitis C test could be crippling to an individual or family, both physically and financially.

We have dedicated leaders within our Cherokee Nation Health Services department who partnered with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Oklahoma Department of Health and the University of Oklahoma on this effort. Additionally, Gilead Sciences, a biopharmaceutical company, donated \$1.5 million to this unique partnership that enabled the creation of a prevention and treatment plan. The Cherokee Nation is the only entity in the country working on an elimination project with the CDC.

Our partners are just as committed as we are to cure patients with hepatitis C and work to reduce the incidents of new infections. The historic joint effort between federal, state and tribal governments will help lay the foundation of a national strategy to fight hepatitis C.

A diagnosis doesn't have to be a death sentence. I hope you will join us in this battle and help us drive out hepatitis C once and for all. Please ask your medical provider to screen you for hepatitis C. It's not often we can say a disease can be completely eliminated from a citizenry, but it's something we can absolutely achieve in the Cherokee Nation.

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Bill John Baker



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