The Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium’s (ANTHC) Colorectal Cancer Program’s mission is to increase colon cancer screening at the regional level. If a patient wants to get a colonoscopy then they often go to the Alaska Native Medical Center (ANMC) hospital for the procedure. ANTHC and Southcentral Foundation jointly own and manage ANMC in Anchorage, where all Alaska Native and American Indian people living in the state are eligible for hospital care. At ANMC we meet Tina Ketah (Tlingit), Lead Patient Navigator for the ANTHC Colorectal Program.

“A Patient Navigator is someone who helps a patient understand what a colonoscopy is, and who answers any questions they have.” Tina continues, “I spend as much time with them as they need to make them feel comfortable.”

Another part of Tina’s job is to keep track of a database of first degree relatives. When someone is diagnosed with colon cancer, Tina asks them to write down the name of their children, brothers, sisters, and their parents—first degree relatives—so she can contact them about getting a colorectal screening, too. That’s because first degree relatives have a higher risk of getting colon cancer themselves.

As it turns out, Tina has a first degree relative. Her own mother had colon cancer—at 31 years of age—but that she had kept it a secret for years. “When I found out, accidentally, I was shocked.” Tina is glad she found out though, because soon afterward she went and got her own colon screening. She learned that her health is good.

Tina says that it is fortunate that the program has a surgeon like Dr. Martin Tevia, to perform the colonoscopy.

It’s easy to see that Tina loves her job for many reasons. Her real motivation is deeply caring for people. “I’ve held hands all the way to the procedure room,” she says, “for those who needed that extra support.”

Patient Navigators

The Tribal Comprehensive Cancer Control Program is purchasing a ‘Super Colon’ model for all of the programs to use. This is an example of how we depend on each other to leverage resources.

— Diana Redwood
ANTHC CRCCP Program Manager
The Readers’ Theater

Educating clients about colorectal cancer by using theater scripts about real life by Community Health Aide Practitioners (CHAP).

At curtain rise: Rita is writing in her journal.

Tina Ketah, ANTHC Colorectal Program Lead Patient Navigator, is playing the role of Rita, while reading the script in front of her.

*Rita: August 11th. My Mom gave me this journal as a graduation present from high school. I guess it’s time to start writing in it. Tomorrow I catch the flight into Anchorage where I’m about to study nursing at UAA.*

Sam Lincoln (Yupik), soon follows, reading his part as Isaac, Rita’s Dad, the guy everyone in the story is trying to get to agree to a colonoscopy. And so begins “What’s the Big Deal?” a play written by P. Shane Mitchell. In all, eight staff members from ANTHC’s colorectal and Southcentral’s colorectal programs came together one June morning, to read the script written for colorectal cancer screening education.

Called the “Readers’ Theater,” the format is about bringing people together to read aloud a scripted conversation. In “What’s the Big Deal?” the topic is about colon cancer screening, a subject that many find difficult to talk about in normal conversation. Readers don’t have to memorize anything for the play. The information is shared easily, and without embarrassment. When it’s over, real conversations about cancer often begin.

The play takes about thirty minutes to read, and like all good plays, has a surprise twist at the end. It can be read anywhere, on the radio, at community events, and with or without costumes. Some groups have even used props.

“It’s nice to have a script to follow,” says Diana Redwood, ANTHC CRCCP manager. “We want to promote health among our people but often we get tongue tied, at least I do, when I try to talk to people. This has the message right in it. Afterward we can all talk more easily.”

The group read about an Alaska Native family, but the play can be adapted to any Native community.

For more information about “What’s the Big Deal?” or other Readers’ Theater scripts, contact Melany Cueva, ANTHC CHAP, 907-729-2441.

The symbolism on the drum is the coming together of the clans from southeast, but they make a heart. When we gather to talk about cancer, it’s a lot of heart work.

— Melany Cueva
ANTHC CHAP Services