

# MEDICINE WOMAN

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On a windy fall day on the Standing Rock Indian reservation in North Dakota, Wehnona Stabler goes home to burn some sage. "I say a little prayer, get me though the day, because I don't know what I'm going to face when I go through those hospital doors." As director of the Indian hospital, Wehnona Stabler battles diabetes, meth addiction, STDs, teenage suicide. And she dreams of floating down the Missouri River to her home on the Omaha reservation, where one of her heroes was born.

Susan La Flesche Picotte (1865-1915) lived on the Nebraska frontier during a time of violent change. As a child she watched an Indian woman die because the white doctor never showed up: "It was only an Indian and it did not matter." So she became a doctor herself, graduating first in her class from the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania. She returned home to a tribe ravaged by disease and alcohol and devoted the rest of her life to healing wounds of body and spirit.

Generations later, Doctor Lucy Reifel walks through the doors of her mobile clinic on the Rosebud Sioux Reservation in South Dakota. She gives shots, weighs infants, and talks to mothers about the virtues of breastfeeding. Then she goes home to her oldest child, a young man who needs constant care.

Casey was born with fetal alcohol syndrome to a mother who had been drinking throughout her pregnancy. Thirty years ago, Doctor Lucy adopted him. "He's a lot smarter than what people give him credit for. And you know he's enriched our family and changed the family dynamics of our children because he is the oldest. He is the oldest and yet he's the youngest."

In Page, Arizona near Monument Valley, Doctor Lori Arviso Alford scrubs her hands in preparation for surgery. Soon she'll walk through the double doors to operate on her first patient of the day. As a graduate of the prestigious Stanford University Medical School, Lori Alvord is the first member of the Navajo tribe to become a surgeon.

Doctor Alvord grew up in a tribal world, a member of the Bear Clan in the dusty little town of Crown Point, New Mexico. Her father was Navajo, her mother white. Neither had a college education. Like Doctor Susan, Lori Alvord lived in two worlds. "I am two different people, defined in different ways. In one by blood in the other by paper." She had once believed she could cure her patients with advanced technology. But she knew something was missing. So, "I went back to the healers of my tribe to learn what a surgical residency could not teach me."

How do you heal a people? Wehnona Stabler has learned that you use what you have. “The medicine, the pills, the shots, the vaccines and all that—it’s all good you know. But there’s that other place it doesn’t touch—your heart, your mind, your feelings.”

When a way of life is shattered, it’s often the women who become the healers. Today’s medicine women struggle, as Doctor Susan did, to serve their people, to raise their families, to hold onto their tribal identities. How can they hope to mend the wounds of body and soul that history has created? And what have they learned about new ways of healing that can help us all?

#### KEY WORDS

- Susan La Flesche Picotte
- Lucy Reifel
- Lori Arviso Alvord
- Wehnona Stabler
- Fetal alcohol syndrome
- Navajo Medicine
- The Scalpel and the Silver Bear
- Healing
- Traditional Native Medicine
- Sweat Lodge
- Women healers
- Native American Doctor
- Omaha Tribe
- Medicine woman
- Medicine man
- Historical trauma
- Picotte Memorial Hospital