Training the Mind’s Eye

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“Everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the power of the world always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. In the old days when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as the hoop was unbroken the people flourished.”

—Black Elk

SOME EDUCATORS BELIEVE that the more ways learners experience something, the better the lesson’s effect. Elementary math teachers may link the number 5 with touching 5 things, hearing the number 5, tasting 5 foods, smelling 5 smells, and walking 5 steps. Experiencing something in multiple ways imprints it in one’s memory.

Images of Health was created in part on that premise: to train the eye as well as the mind. In a similar way, Circle of Sisters, a program initiated in 2009 for Native American women, was crafted on the relational world view of Native Americans that mind, body, and spirit are related and that health relies on a balance among them.2 Meant to encourage breast cancer awareness, screening, and early detection, program activities include having women string beads the size of tumors that are typically detected by different detection methods, including self-examination and mammography.

All of the participants, Native American women from Texas, undergo free mammography screenings and participate in a daylong series of workshops on art, nutrition, physical activity, stress reduction, and cancer prevention. In one program that took place in the spring of 2010 at the Integrative Medicine Center (formerly the Place . . . of Wellness) at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, circles of friendship, circles of the annual calendar, and circles of beads were focal points.

The bead stringing sought to train the fingers, the eyes, and the mind to the differences between the sizes of tumors detected by a range of methods, from regular mammography (the smallest beads) to those detected by touch during rarely performed self-examinations without mammography (the largest).3 Most emphatically, it stressed the importance of early detection and how the method of detection affects the potential of early detection. Women had opportunities to highlight barriers to early detection and to discuss how to overcome them.

Although the US Preventive Services Task Force no longer encourages clinicians to teach women how to perform breast self-examinations,4 the American Cancer Society considers breast self-examination an optional procedure in breast cancer screening.5 Moreover, this organization, along with MD Anderson Cancer Center, recognizes that women who are familiar with the appearance and feel of their normal breasts may more readily detect

Native American women participating in Circle of Sisters string beads the dimensions of breast cancer tumors detected by different methods to demonstrate the importance of mammography screening.
abnormalities and report them to their doctor.

Once participants completed stringing the beads, they tied the necklaces around their necks. As they left, it was evident that each woman had made the necklace her own, some tying them close to the neck and others suspending the beads on a lengthy cord. Whatever their style, the necklaces made another symbolic circle for participants, emphasizing that the circle of time calls for repeated screening and that cancer prevention efforts are continuous.

**About the Authors**

At the time of the work, the authors were with the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center, Houston.

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**Contributors**

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**Endnotes**


