

Diabetes in Indian Territory: Revisiting Kelly M. West's Theory of 1940 [ABSTRACT]

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The late Kelly M. West, also known as the "father of diabetes epidemiology," asserted in his 1974 essay, "Diabetes in American Indians and Other Native Populations of the New World," that diabetes was extremely rare among Oklahoma Indians prior to 1940. He used no ethnohistorical data, instead basing his conclusions on the absence of the word "diabetes" in medical records and in interviews he claimed to have conducted with Oklahoma Indians. Yet to the contrary, historical and ethnobotanical data reveals that Indians in Indian Territory (made the state of Oklahoma in 1907) began suffering from food-related illnesses, including diabetes or pre-diabetes, before the Civil War. West's theory of 1940 is important. His assertion has not been challenged; his essay has been cited at least 260 times and as recently as 2016. This paper discusses diabetes among Oklahoma Indians before 1940 and reinforces the importance of utilizing ethnohistorical data in medical studies dealing with indigenous health, as well as understanding the connection between the loss of traditional foodways and the modern health crisis.

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