In an interview with the director of the National Library of Medicine, Nainoa Thompson shares his story for Native Voices. Born in Honolulu, Nainoa Thompson is chair of the board of trustees for Kamehameha Schools and a member of the Board of Regents for the University of Hawaii. In addition, he has been lead navigator on long-distance voyages of the Hōkūle’a.

Katherine Gottlieb, president and CEO of the Southcentral Foundation—an Alaska Native healthcare organization in Anchorage, Alaska that provides traditional and Western medicine, launched the Family Wellness Warriors Initiative to address domestic abuse and child neglect in Alaska Native communities.

Speaking with the director of the National Library of Medicine, Jeffrey Henderson, M.D. addresses the importance of health information to improve the care of Native peoples. Dr. Henderson, Cheyenne River Sioux, is president and CEO of the Black Hills Center for American Indian Health, an organization committed to conducting research to better educate Native Americans on an array of health issues, from tobacco control to cancer.

The U.S. National Library of Medicine (NLM) developed and produced Native Voices: Native Peoples’ Concepts of Health and Illness. The American Library Association (ALA) Public Programs Office, in partnership with NLM, tours the exhibition to America’s libraries.
Health, illness, and cultural life form a unique and interconnected relationship in the lives of Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians. Though their beliefs and practices vary—Native peoples are far from a single, homogeneous group—shared values and experiences have helped reinforce the importance of community, spirit, and the land for countless generations.

In this exhibition you will hear native voices speak of the responsibilities of the individual, the interconnectedness of communities, and of reverence for nature, tradition, and the Great Spirit. You will also hear about the challenges and opportunities of balancing traditional medicine ways with Western medicine. Native concepts of health and illness have sustained diverse peoples since ancient times. Health, illness, and cultural life form a unique and interconnected relationship in the lives of Native Hawaiians, Alaska Natives, and Native Americans.

Reverence for tradition, tribal elders, and a Supreme Being have been fundamental to Native health and culture for generations. Despite centuries of detrimental U.S. government policy, Native traditions and values—including loyalty and military service—have been kept alive and are being taught to a new generation.

Many traditional healers believe that every person has responsibility for his or her proper behavior and health, and that healing is often done by the patient. Healers therefore serve as facilitators and counselors, often using stories, humor, music, tobacco, smudging, medicinal plants and herbs, and related ceremonies to bring their healing energies into the healing space.

Native concepts of health and illness have sustained diverse peoples since ancient times. Explore this exhibition and learn how revival and pride in native ideas among a new generation can help sustain them in the twenty-first century.