

“To Smudge or Not to Smudge?”

■ Traditional practices conflict with those in frail health and insurance requirements.

By Ron Karten

Perhaps it was inevitable that the traditional practice of smudging would come into conflict with more modern smoking codes in buildings. And perhaps even more inevitable that in a health facility, the smoke from smudging would irritate patients with heart and lung problems.

Dealing with this conflict was “one of the big priorities in the planning process” for the Health & Wellness Center, which just turned five years old, according to Tribal Chairwoman Cheryl Kennedy. “A lot of time was devoted to (finding ways to accommodate) cultural practices, including smudging,” she said.

Current Tribal regulations dictate that “we DO NOT allow smoke or smoking of any kind in our Tribal facilities,” according to a recent email broadcast throughout the Tribes’ system from Mike Larsen, Facilities and Maintenance manager. “This is for safety and health purposes. It is especially important that it does not happen in the Health & Wellness Center, due to health conditions of some of our patients.”

And in fact, according to Larsen, there have been complaints about the smoke from smudging by patients of the Health & Wellness Center.

Afterward, Larsen said, “I think smudging touches a lot of people and I’ve enjoyed it, but I’ve got to uphold policies.”

At the Health & Wellness Center, staff acknowledge that smudging is practiced, and in fact, in email exchanges on the subject, Dr. Joseph Stone, director of the Behavioral Health unit, reported, “Of course this is a traditional spiritual and culturally appropriate practice. Furthermore, I think it is important to offer to clients who request it. Making the counseling environment a sacred space.”

“I don’t have a problem with it,” said Bobby Mercier, a language specialist with the Cultural Resources department, and a member of the committee looking into the practice. “It keeps the Tribe aligned with age old cultural practices.”

But for Tyson Mercier, a Maintenance Technician in the Wellness facility, buildings are not the right places to smudge. “I’d say don’t do it in the buildings. An air quality specialist told me that it’s the same as smoking in the building. There are carcinogens in the smoke and people would be affected by it.

“I think if they want to take it outside, that would be great. We have to think of our Tribal Elders and our patrons who come down to the facilities.”

Likewise, June Sell-Sherer, Tribal Council Secretary, said, “It’s probably a health issue, and we’ve got to put that as a priority.”

It seems fairly well known that whatever the

rules, people do smudge in offices throughout the Tribe’s buildings. One source said, “I wouldn’t come into the office until it was smudged down.”

“That’s the way we’ve been taught. That’s the way we’ve been raised,” said Bobby Mercier. “And to be here and not be who we are. These are our buildings.”

Three important issues arise in this discussion, according to Connie Holmes, Acting Human Resources Manager, who has organized a committee to make recommendations to the Tribal Council. “Religious freedom, respecting others



“Smudging don’t make me an Indian.”

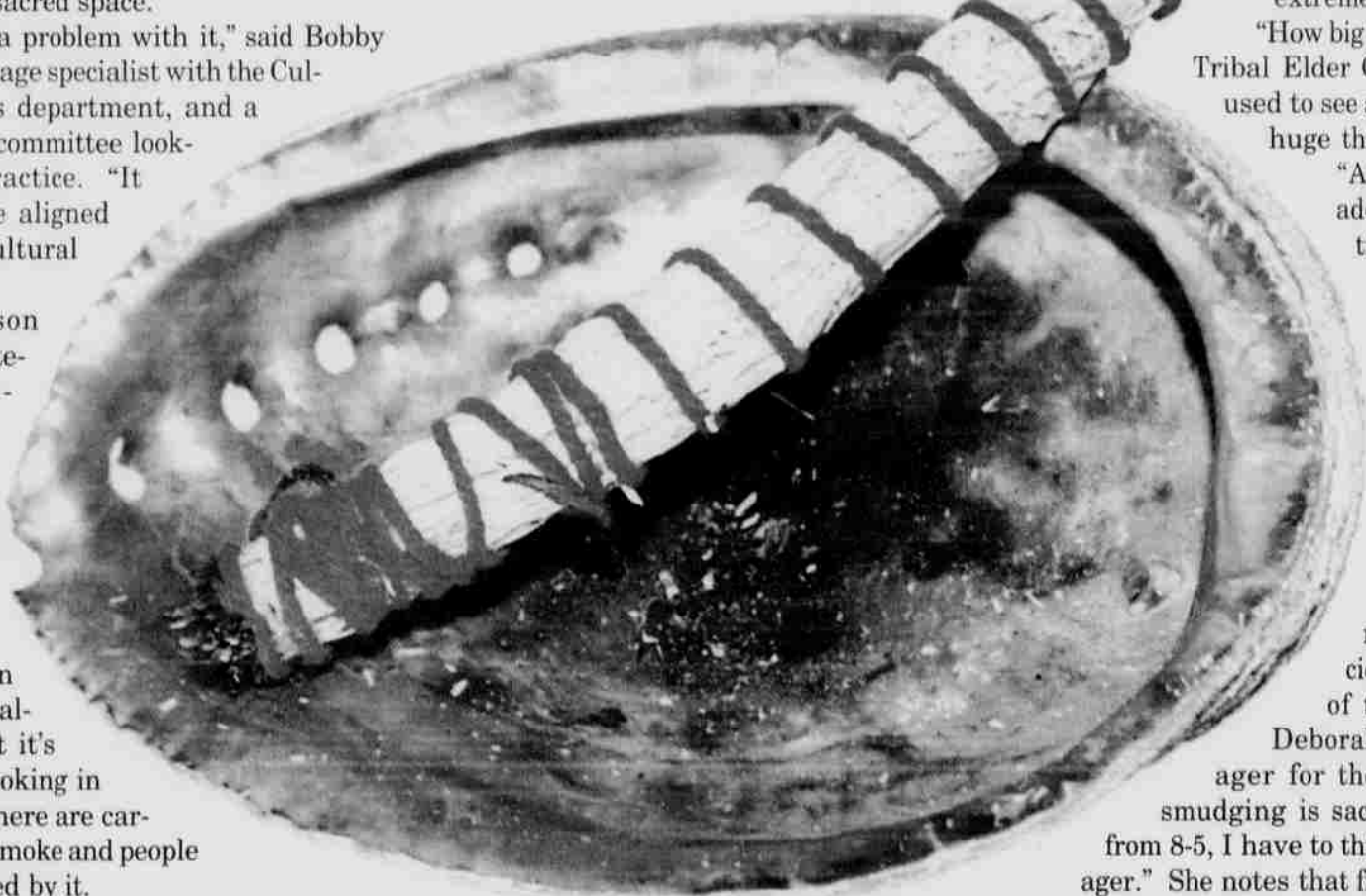
~Reyn Leno
Tribal Council Vice Chairman

affected by it, and if a fire started, our insurance company would not cover it.”

As Cheryl Kennedy remembers initial discus-

Smoke — The burning of herbs or incense, called “smudging,” is a sacred practice held in common by many Native Americans. Sage, sweet grass or cedar are burned to purify one’s self or surroundings. It is also used in prayers and ceremonies. This particular smudge pot (shell) has been used by a Tribal Elder to smudge down the Public Information Office on significant occasions.

Photo by Peta Tinda



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~Bobby Mercier
Language Specialist



What is smudging?

“First you must smudge yourself and be cleansed from bad thoughts, or negative energy and be cleansed both the physical and spiritual. This helps the healing come through in a clear way, without being distorted or sidetracked by negative things. When we do this we have good heart, so we can sing, pray, and walk in a sacred manner and be helped by the spirits to the sacred realm. At home, or workplace or out in nature, Natives believe that it’s our tradition to practice this ritual as much as possible.”

~Vernon Kennedy
Burns Paiute Tribal member

sions about the practice, before the Health & Wellness Center was built, an informal decision was made to allow smudging with “the window open and door closed. It was primarily concerned with Behavioral Health & Wellness (for folks) who would need it.”

That’s how Patti Tom-Martin, Manager of the Vocational Rehabilitation section in the Wellness Center remembers

it, too. “Only now, sometimes, there’s so much smoke that it comes all the way down the hall.”

“It goes to common sense,” said Reyn Leno, Vice Chair of the Tribal Council. “Voc rehab does it (sensibly), and then there’s those that go to extremes.”

“How big is your smudge?” asked Tribal Elder Claudette Parazoo. “I used to see a shell and it was not a huge thing.”

“At functions,” Leno added, “people have options to come and go, but my father has lung problems and he couldn’t go (to the Wellness Center when smudging was taking place).”

“Smudging don’t make me an Indian,” he said.

“It could put us at risk if some kind of incident occurred because of the smudging,” said

Deborah Larsen, Risk Manager for the Tribe. “I feel that smudging is sacred,” she added, “but from 8-5, I have to think of it as a risk manager.” She notes that fire is not the only risk. If the smoke sets off the sprinkler system, that also can cause damage. She also recommends an area outside be designated for anybody who wants to smudge.

Perri McDaniel, a Cultural Protection Specialist, said that compartmentalizing cultural heritage is not the Indian way.

Some compartmentalizing may be inevitable, however. As Tyson Mercier said, “The smoke from smudging is supposed to go to the gods, not the ceiling tiles.”

The new policy is due in a matter of weeks.