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Governor, cabinet secretary share thoughts on study

SANTA FE — New Mexico Governor Michelle Lujan-Grisham and Dr. David Scrase, the cabinet secretary for the Health and Human Services Department, shared their thoughts on a recent study that says Native American populations may be more at risk of catching COVID-19.

“I am not a clinician, I’m not a scientist, and I’m not a researcher, [but] I was concerned about the potential for this virus to have a higher mortality rate for indigenous populations, largely for the reasons that we talk about: socio-economic and rural aspects,” Lujan-Grisham told the *Gallup Sun*
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“If you don’t have access to running water, or access to healthcare, and you’re living in multi-generational households, with a single bathroom and very small living spaces. you can’t really self-quarantine yourself. These are high-risk issues,” Lujan-Grisham said.

The governor said that what was learned after H1N1, is that indigenous populations had a four times higher mortality rate than other populations.

“I’ve been really worried that we are going to learn that through the progression of this infection,” Lujan-Grisham said.

In their research paper, *The Medical Basis for Increased Susceptibility of COVID-19 among the Navajo and other Indigenous Tribes: A Survey* , Joseph DeSoto, MD, Ph.D., and Shazia Tabassum Hakim, Ph.D., two Diné College science professors, said they believe there are genetic factors behind the high COVID-19 numbers on the Navajo Nation

The paper accepted for publication by the *Journal of Biomedical Research and Reviews* on May 29, says in part that "... Native Americans and Asians may be particularly susceptible to this disease (COVID-19)." DeSoto and Hakim cite susceptibility based on an enzyme identified as ACE2.

"There are four things that aggravate COVID-19 as it pertains to the Navajo Nation. Medically, it's the high rate of diabetes, hypertension, genetics and poor protein diets among the Navajo; poor health care infrastructure and technology; poverty, with the associated lack of water access; and dense multi-generational living arrangements," DeSoto said.

There are over 6,600 confirmed COVID-19 cases on the Navajo Nation as of the last update by the tribe on June 15. The virus has claimed the lives of 311 people on the Navajo Nation.

"It's absolutely no question that the infection rate among those on the Navajo Nation is the highest of any in the state," Dr. David Scrase, Health and Human Services cabinet secretary, said.

However, Scrase said another group has an even higher mortality rate.

"The highest mortality is in white individuals, and part of the belief is that a higher percent of white individuals live in nursing facilities and are the ones dying," he said.

DeSoto and Hakim are also studying food scarcity, eating habits and the lack of food availability in Navajo communities.

More information on the research can be found at https://www.dinecollege.edu/news-release-dine-college-profs-believe-more-reasons-behind-high-covid-19-cases-on-navajo/ .

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