



## Diné Neonatologist's Vision for Native-Led Research Amid NIH Cuts



*Dr. Joshua Sheak, M.D., Ph.D., a practicing neonatologist originally from Upper Fruitland, hopes to one day return to the Navajo Nation to advance Native-led pediatric research and care*

*Photo Courtesy of: Joshua Sheak*

**WASHINGTON, D.C.** — This week, the Navajo Nation Washington Office met with Dr. Joshua Sheak, M.D., Ph.D., a Navajo neonatology fellow and physician-scientist finishing his fellowship in Ohio. Originally from Farmington and Upper Fruitland, NM, Dr. Sheak is a graduate of Farmington High School and the University of New Mexico's MD/PhD program, and he has spent over a decade preparing for a career that integrates biomedical research with newborn care. His long-term goal is to return to the Southwest or the Navajo Nation to launch a research program that supports Native patients and mentors the next generation of Indigenous medical students.

Most recently, this dream has taken a hit. Dr. Sheak had been selected to participate in the esteemed Pediatric Scientist Development Program, a federal research initiative funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The program was unexpectedly defunded in early 2025. His research, which focused on how a common steroid therapy given to pregnant persons at risk for preterm delivery impacts lung development of premature infants, was on

track to bring much-needed data to communities with high rates of premature delivery, including tribal nations. With the grant rescinded, Dr. Sheak needed to re-evaluate career priorities and will likely shift his academic focus to mostly full-time hospital work.

During the meeting, Dr. Sheak highlighted to NNWO staff a broader and more alarming reality: Sheak cited data from the American Board of Pediatrics saying there are **fewer than 1,000 Indigenous pediatricians in the entire country** and even fewer pediatric subspecialists. The number of Indigenous doctors in specialty fields is already extremely low, and cuts to federal research programs only make it harder for Native professionals to stay in the pipeline. It's not just about funding—it's about the future of Native-led science, and whether Indigenous communities will have trusted experts who understand both their culture and their medical needs.

"My hope is that stories like mine might be able to bolster that effort and share that the work that y' all (NNWO) are doing has a real impact on the people across the country, including myself in Ohio," said Sheak, "It underscores the fragility, of the professional infrastructure that's built to try to support people who want to do medicine and in particular want to do pediatrics. That there's just so few people that if you lose people along the way, it has the potential to have really big impacts, really big consequences for the future."

The Navajo Nation Washington Office hosted this meeting to better understand how national policy decisions, especially those affecting research and healthcare, directly impact Navajo people. Dr. Sheak's experience shows that even small changes in federal programs can have long-lasting consequences for Indigenous representation in science and medicine. As the Nation continues to build its healthcare workforce and expand career pathways for Navajo students, we will keep listening to stories like Dr. Sheak's to guide our advocacy.

Dr. Sheak asked to clarify that his thoughts and opinions do not necessarily reflect those of his employer.