

MiamiHerald.com 

Posted on Tue, Feb. 03, 2009

University of Miami embarks on landmark study of Latino health

BY ANA VECIANA-SUAREZ

When a recruiter from the University of Miami's Behavioral Medicine Research Center knocked on Claudia Berrios' Little Havana door, she didn't know the encounter would change her life.

The medical school representative wanted her family to consider participating in a landmark study on Latino health that would serve as baseline data for the largest minority group in the country. But the comprehensive battery of tests delivered some surprising news to the Nicaraguan native: She was prediabetic. As a result, Berrios changed her diet and began working out in the gym, shedding more than 20 pounds since September.

"A lot of people don't really know what they have until something bad happens," said Berrios, 28. "They neglect their health. I was lucky to find out."

Berrios' transformation was an unexpected byproduct of this historic research project taking place at UM's Miller School of Medicine and three other field centers in San Diego, the Bronx and Chicago. Funded by the National Heart, Lung, Blood Institute, the Hispanic Community Health Study/Study of Latinos seeks to expand the scope of current research on Hispanic health.

Most of the data available to health experts now is based on studies involving only Mexican Americans, which means that little is known about other Latino groups.

"What we know about the health of Hispanics in the U.S. is about Mexican Americans," says Neil Schneiderman, the study's principal investigator and the James L. Knight Professor of Psychology, Medicine, Psychiatry and Behavior Sciences. "We have a fair amount from Puerto Ricans because of New York, but we don't know much about Cubans and Central and South Americans."

SIX-YEAR STUDY

The six-year, \$61 million study hopes to gather baseline health data from 16,000 Latinos at the four national sites, with a data coordinating center at the University of North Carolina

Each site focuses on a particular population. At UM, 51 percent of the 4,000 study participants will be Cuban and the remaining Central and South American. The participants, ages 18 to 74, are being recruited from 20 contiguous Census tracts along Southwest Eighth Street, extending into parts of Coconut Grove and Coral Gables.

Unlike most other studies, participants cannot simply volunteer. They are recruited from preselected communities that are more than 80 percent Hispanic. This provides a better cross-section of the population.

The first three years of the study will be devoted to data-gathering, followed by three years of follow-

up. A 20-person team sees about six people a day, who are usually picked up by a UM van about 7 a.m. -- while they're fasting -- and transported to the offices occupied by the research group.

"The assessments are quite thorough," says Dr. Marc Gellman, research director at the Behavioral Medicine Research Center. "They get tests here they wouldn't get in a doctor's office in a typical physical."

Indeed, in addition to the standard blood tests, researchers also include psychosocial assessments, dental exams, neuro-cognitive testing, and hearing and lung function. Participants take home a sleep monitor to wear for one night to measure respiration and a physical activity monitor they use for several continuous days. They receive a full report in about three weeks.

Participants then get a follow-up phone call four to six weeks after the initial clinic visit. Study personnel also contact them once a year to complete a health update interview.

"We do not treat patients," Gellman says. "We're an observational study, but people can go back to their own doctors with this information."

TAKING PART

Victor Monzon-Aguirre, 59, says he decided to be part of the study because "I'm of that age that you begin to wonder, 'how am I physically?' I wanted to establish a baseline for me and this was very convenient. I could have all the tests done in one place in six hours. No waiting, no lines."

As he learned more about the actual study, the management consultant was happy to contribute his time. "It's really a great opportunity to get information that will help the community," he says.

The study will also measure how assimilation affects the health of immigrants. "We're not just measuring blood pressure and lipids," Schneiderman says. "We're looking at acculturation and how immigrants' habits change over time. Since arriving here, are they smoking more or less? Are they eating more or less? What are they eating? How does assimilation affect health?"

Gellman likens the Hispanic Community Health Study to the famous Framingham Study, which began in 1948 with more than 5,000 adult subjects in the Massachusetts town by the same name and is now on its third generation of participants. Much of what we know about heart disease is based on this study.

INITIAL FINDINGS

While it's still too early to draw any conclusions from the data gathered so far, some information has garnered the researchers' attention:

- There's a higher incidence of diabetes among Hispanics.
- Many participants have an elevated level of cholesterol.
- A "terrifically high rate" of participants do not have a personal physician, an HMO or insurance. UM researchers hope information gleaned from the study will help set health policy.

"As Hispanics continue to become a larger percentage of the population, we need to prepare health

care for the future," Schneiderman says. ``We will be able to identify needs and what has to be done to improve the health of our community."

© 2009 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.miamiherald.com>