

## Commissioner's Column

# Health Disparities and Cultural Awareness

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As every physician knows, effective communication is an essential component of the doctor-patient relationship. Nevertheless, misunderstandings frequently occur even among those who share a common language and cultural heritage. A review of physicians and health care institutions affiliated with Harvard University found that 12 percent of litigation cases resulted primarily from a failure of communication between patient and physician.

In Westchester County, the potential for miscommunication is greatly increased by the fact that nearly one in four residents is foreign born. Spanish is the only language spoken at home by 16 percent of Westchester residents.

Barriers to communication can become barriers to health care and it is likely that cultural misunderstandings contribute to the disparities in health outcomes affecting racial and ethnic minorities in the United States. Life expectancy for blacks in Westchester is ten years shorter than for whites. Mortality rates for cardiovascular disease, diabetes and several types of cancer are higher for blacks than for whites. Black infants are three times more likely than white infants to die before their first birthdays. More than 52 percent of AIDS cases in Westchester occur in non-Hispanic blacks, although this demographic represents only 14 percent of Westchester's population.

To address these issues, County Executive Andy Spano established the Westchester County Blue Ribbon Task Force for the Elimination of Health Disparities Among Blacks last September. The Task Force's initial assessment report listed the following among reasons given for the failure of some minority residents to receive needed health care:

- Perceived lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity on the part of the health care provider;
- Apparent lack of awareness among patients and practitioners regarding specific racial disparities in health outcomes and possible reasons for these disparities;
- Language barriers;
- Shortage of minority health care providers in the region – one practicing physician on the Task Force reported that patients travel up to 100 miles to see her because of a shortage of African-American practitioners in her field.

A person's cultural background can strongly influence his or her perception of disease and its causes and may also impose limits on his or her treatment options. For example, certain cultures place a strong emphasis on herbal medicines or alternative therapies. This is important for the physician to know when prescribing medications since patients might also self-medicate with herbal products that can cause dangerous interactions with prescribed drugs. These patients might be unaware of the dangers and may, therefore, fail to inform their doctor of herbal products they are using.

*(Continued on next page)*

**Commissioner's Column...** *(Continued from previous page)*

Nowhere is the effect of cultural background on health outcomes more apparent than when discussing behavioral risk factors. In many societies from which Westchester's new residents are drawn, smoking is still popular and the well-documented negative health impact of smoking is still thought to be "no big deal." Different cultures historically have different views about obesity and may downplay the health effects of being overweight. Providing risk reduction advice is an important part of each health care provider's role and this is the area where cultural sensitivity is most needed and most effective. Being able to understand a patient's cultural environment can greatly improve a provider's ability to persuade the patient to choose behaviors that will protect and enhance his or her health.

Physician-patient relationships are built upon a foundation of trust. The effectiveness of medical intervention can often depend on the degree of trust that is established. This is particularly the case with preventive care. Routine physicals, cancer screenings and pediatric wellness visits are important tools for the improvement of health outcomes. Lower rates of preventive care visits among minority patients are undoubtedly a factor contributing to the disparities in health outcomes that we see.

Building patient trust is a necessary part of the healing work that medical professionals perform and it begins with understanding the whole patient. The following are some suggestions for improving physician-patient communications and helping to address disparities in health outcomes:

- Identify patients who may be at higher risk for specific health conditions due to racial or ethnic background and let them know they are at elevated risk;
- Emphasize the importance of preventive measures, such as screening, vaccination and healthy lifestyle choice;
- Use culturally appropriate health education messages, channels of communication, and materials for target audiences;
- Work with the patient's social environment. For example, involve extended family members in the process;
- Develop culturally-sensitive health care protocols;
- Take advantage of the health education literature in Spanish and other languages that the Westchester County Health Department makes available free of charge;
- Give preference in hiring health care workers to those with bilingual skills and support bilingual skills training for staff.

For more information, please visit the Westchester County Health Department Web site at [www.westchestergov.com/health](http://www.westchestergov.com/health). ♦