

Yesterday

In 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt said, “The success or failure of any government in the final analysis must be measured by the well-being of its citizens. Nothing can be more important to a state than its public health.”

- Until recently, medical research tended primarily to address the needs of the majority population, with little examination of cultural or gender-based influences on disease incidence or health outcomes often seen among diverse communities.

Today

As the U.S. population continues to grow in diversity, reducing health disparities has become a vital area of focus for health researchers. Limited access to health care services, along with barriers resulting from language and cultural differences, are cited as primary reasons for a variety of disparities in health care, such as the low rates of cancer screening and treatment noted within certain minority populations.

- Medically underserved populations are defined as those that have inadequate access to or poor utilization of high quality health care. These include low literacy, low-income, rural, tribal, isolated, and non-English-speaking groups, as well as others not traditionally reached, such as the homebound. Reaching these populations often requires specialized interventions in their communities.

Examples of specialized community interventions include:

Inner-city Black men with high blood pressure.

- Young, Black men from inner cities are at particular risk for the complications of uncontrolled high blood pressure, and many have never had contact with health care providers. A culturally sensitive behavioral and pharmacological intervention, delivered by a nurse-led multidisciplinary team at the community level, helped these men improve their lifestyle behaviors and bring their blood pressure under better control.

A home visit program for at-risk mothers.

- Pre- and postnatal home visits by a public health nurse to new, at-risk mothers helped the mothers reduce pregnancy complications, improve their economic self-sufficiency, and delay future pregnancies. In addition, at 6 years of age the children had fewer childhood injuries or behavioral problems, along with higher scores for IQ and language, compared to similar children outside of the intervention.

Low-literacy heart patients.

- A self-management program designed at a very basic literacy level provided a group of patients with heart failure, most of whom were male, low-income, and Black, with health education and a self-management booklet, along with a digital scale to help monitor their fluid balance. Participants at all literacy levels improved their knowledge, self-care behavior, and quality of life, and had fewer hospitalizations and deaths, compared to those in a control group.

Hispanic Youth and HIV/AIDS Prevention.

- The incidence of acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) is up to three times higher among Latino adolescents than among their white counterparts. A culturally-tailored HIV education program called “¡Cuidate! (Take Care of Yourself)” helped Hispanic adolescents reduce risky sexual behaviors. Youths in the program were a third less likely to report having had sexual intercourse in the past 3 months, almost half as likely to report having multiple partners across the follow-up period, and reported more consistent use of condoms.

Tomorrow

Specialized community interventions are essential if the entire population is to benefit from improved strategies for health promotion and disease prevention. New technologies and improved outreach will link underserved populations to available resources.

- Research conducted at NIH is poised to make strides in *predicting* the needs of underserved populations, *personalizing* care in culturally appropriate ways, and *preempting* unequal access to health care.

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