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New Study Highlights Latina Perceptions of Health
May 2, 2007

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – The Spanish-speaking immigrant population is growing at staggering rates in the United States, climbing more than 50 percent in 10 years according to the latest U.S. Census Bureau numbers. And healthcare professionals are looking for different ways to communicate the idea of a healthy lifestyle to this burgeoning patient segment.

Work by Illinois Wesleyan University's School of Nursing Director Donna Hartweg and Associate Professor of Hispanic Studies Christina Isabelli-Garcia that gives healthcare communication a boost is drawing international attention. An ongoing study by the two women is asking Latina women the question: What does it mean to be healthy?

"If healthcare workers better understand what women feel when they come into this country, they will be able to better guide them about a healthy lifestyle," said Hartweg, who compiled data based on focus groups led by Isabelli-Garcia.

The groups, consisting of 43 Mexican and Central American female immigrants to the Bloomington-Normal area, were all conducted by Isabelli-Gracia in Spanish. "These women had all immigrated to the United States within the last two to 10 years," said Isabelli-Garcia of why the discussions were conducted in Spanish. "Their linguistic ability in English was not high enough for them to successfully communicate their perceptions of health to me."

"If we want people to be physically active, we have to know how they view physical activity," said Hartweg. National studies show the health of Latina women decreases after they come to the U.S, and they are at greater risk for diabetes. The findings of the initial study will be published in May in the journal *Hispanic Health Care International*. In the article, the professors take results from the focus groups that may help give health-care professionals an understanding of how to incorporate good health habits into the lives of Spanish-speaking, immigrant women.

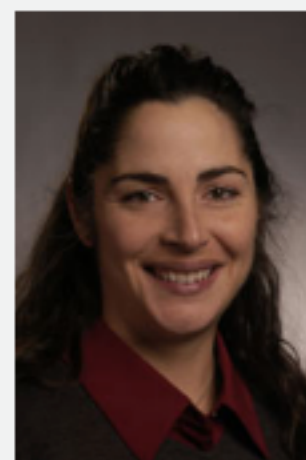
According to Hartweg, the initial study showed some surprising results. When asked to describe a healthy person, women in all of the focus groups answered there was no such thing. "Women associated being healthy as being without any pain or stress," said Hartweg. "So it was almost an impossible goal." As discussion continued, the women began to qualify main themes for a healthy person including a lack of disease, being happy and proper nutrition and exercise.

"Women in the study found good nutrition difficult once they come to America," said Hartweg. "Many of them hold down two jobs, which removes the sit-down family meal for them."

Hartweg said language can act as a barrier for doctors giving healthy advice to this population of women. "One participant recounted a time when her doctor told her to get exercise. She was working two jobs, which were physical in nature, and thought the doctor meant work harder. It wasn't until she returned to see him later that he explained exercise meant activity outside of work," said Hartweg, adding that health-care workers who understand the challenges for Latina immigrant women can assist with the solutions.

The two professors will continue the research with a new round of focus groups concentrating on how to encourage physical activity in immigrant Latina women. In evidence that the issue of health-care for Spanish-speaking immigrants travels beyond borders, Hartweg has been invited to present the second phase of the study in May at the International Council of Nurses (ICN) in Yokohama, Japan. "Having the paper accepted indicated the interest in promoting health to this population of immigrants," said Hartweg of speaking to the ICN that represents more than 120 countries.

The population of McLean County, where the study takes place, grew 16.5 percent over the last decade, yet the Hispanic population jumped 48 percent over that same time, according to the National Center for Health Statistics and Center for Disease Control. "It's an incredible number of people and a segment of the population that cannot be ignored," said Hartweg.



Christina Isabelli (above)
and Donna Hartweg

