

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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ASTHMA EDUCATION AND PREVENTION: PROGRAM AIMED AT DECREASING ATTACKS IN HISPANIC, MINORITY POPULATION

DALLAS — August 14, 1995 — Inner-city Hispanic schoolchildren are being screened for and learning about asthma as part of a UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas and National Institutes of Health-funded project.

Dr. Rebecca Gruchalla, assistant professor of internal medicine, received a five-year grant from the NIH to establish a screening and educational program for elementary schoolchildren in a predominantly Hispanic neighborhood in West Dallas.

The goal of "Asthma Control y Tratamiento para Ninos" (Asthma Control and Treatment [ACT] for Children), is to teach inner-city parents and their children who have the disorder how to prevent asthma attacks, which might cause a mild scare or even prove fatal.

"Asthma has been a particularly troublesome disease in inner-city minority populations, including Hispanics," Gruchalla said. "What we are doing is setting up a community-based educational program in which the community itself can participate and continue after the funding has stopped.

"Research is showing that asthma rates are on the rise in the Hispanic community, and we need to do something to combat it."

Children living in the inner city often find their environment a detriment to their health. Among the factors that initiate asthma attacks are high ozone levels, industrial pollution and passive cigarette smoke from family members. For children with allergies, an asthmatic condition can be aggravated in homes where droppings from cockroaches and dust mites are common.

"Most importantly, however, we realize that the families of inner-city children often don't have the economic means to get prompt medical attention," Gruchalla said. "This being the case, it also means they don't get access to state-of-the-art treatment."

Gruchalla's team anticipates that educating parents and their children on how to prevent

(MORE)

ASTHMA — 2

asthma attacks, whether with regular medication or by taking an active role in modifying their environment, will curb the incidence of asthma. Decreasing and preventing asthma attacks also has an economic benefit because it is less expensive to prevent than to treat an attack in the emergency room, she said. The team hopes to decrease emergency treatments through educational group sessions.

The first group of 20 participants were selected last October. They went through the first ACT educational session in February with follow-up this summer.

Children with signs of asthma detected during the initial screening and those who reported frequent bouts with asthma were recruited into the program. The screenings involved breathing into a mouthpiece on a tube connected to a computer. The breath test measured lung capacity and strength.

The second ACT session will begin in October and will involve up to 10 families. Follow-up on the second group is expected in December. One-year follow-ups will be conducted for both groups.

The children selected for the ACT program are from Gabe P. Allen Elementary School and Eladio R. Martinez Learning Center in West Dallas. ACT screenings and educational sessions with the children's families are being conducted at the nearby Saldivar Children's Clinic, part of the Community-Oriented Primary Care Clinics operated by Parkland Memorial Hospital.

Involved in the program with Gruchalla are co-investigators Dr. Donald Kennerly, chief of allergy at UT Southwestern, and Dr. Yvonne Coyle, associate director of Parkland's COPC Clinics. Two members of the UT Southwestern allergy division also are assisting the research team. They are Nina Gorham, research data coordinator, and Dolores Santoyo, social worker and community liaison.

Although education and prevention is the primary goal of the ACT program, Gruchalla and her colleagues also want to enlist Hispanic community leaders in continuing the program on a voluntary basis after the federal funding is discontinued. "The health of our children is important to our future," Gruchalla said. "I hope that we can get the community involved."

A similar program, after which the Dallas-based program is modeled, was conducted by the University of California, Los Angeles, UCLA School of Medicine.

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