Reducing Health Disparities: Our Progress

The Awakening

Last month, I set out to share a message with you about our Reducing Health Disparities Initiative. Then, Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast. Now I find that my message about health disparities is timely in a way I might never have imagined. The stories and images of Hurricane Katrina underscored something we have been grappling with for the last few years: Race has a profound impact on many facets of the way Americans live their lives, whether it is how they get health care or how they fare in disasters.

When we embarked on the initial stage of what was to become our Reducing Health Disparities Initiative (RHDI) almost five years ago, we were focusing on diversity and cultural competence. As we talked about the issues and tried to formulate strategies, senior staff and I realized that we needed to expand to looking at reducing health disparities.

What I realized is that as a country, health disparities had been with us for a long time. Yet those disparities had rarely been highlighted or spoken about. Only in recent years, have the studies and data documenting disparities become published and widely known.

When we began our Initiative, the respected Institute of Medicine had just issued its landmark report, Unequal Treatment, describing the impact of race on health outcomes. Its major finding was that even in settings where providers and programs are clearly dedicated to providing the best care for everyone, race seems to predict who will have less access and poorer outcomes.

I realized that until we began to speak loudly and often about the disparities we could never begin to approach eliminating them. Speaking loudly means being willing to talk about the difficult issues. Lack of health insurance, poverty, socio-economic deprivation and language access are obvious contributors to health disparities but there is now abundant evidence that racism is also a factor. And although it’s obvious that racism continues to be rampant in our society, I was taken aback when it reared its ugly head in the practice of medicine.

What the studies are finding is that unconscious bias can creep into medical decision making. A critically important way to reduce the bias is to bring it to the surface - become aware of the ways it functions. This year RHDI will be providing education on this issue. You’ll be hearing more about this in the future.

Last year with funding from the Hospital Council of Northern and Central California, we published our own report Health Indicators for Selected Cities and Places in Contra Costa. Reading that report, one cannot avoid the evidence of how racial disparities affect our own county and the African-American community in particular.

The Strategies

The challenge is how an organization as varied as ours goes about addressing the centuries old issues of racism – along with the other barriers to care. One thing is clear: This is not an effort by one or two people but an all-out journey involving everyone. We also realized early on that we needed to

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designate a point person to lead this effort – that is José
Martín, our RHDI Leader.

Although we have a very long way to go before we
will be able to see a measurable impact on specific
disparities, I am pleased with the commitment so many
people have shown. Go to the RHDI page on our
website and on the Intranet to read about the employees
and programs that have been given 2005 RHDI Awards
for their contributions to moving us forward. This month,
on the RHDI page, we highlight some of the Initiative
accomplishments and plans for the coming two years.
A complete progress report is being distributed and is
available on our website (cchealth.org).

Our Accomplishments

When we launched the RHDI, there were three key areas we decided to focus on: improving linguistic access,
implementing training and other activities to improve cultural and linguistic competence, and developing a climate that
values patient, client, customer and employee diversity.

Anyone who reads our progress report should be impressed by the structure that has developed in all of our
divisions as well as the unique work being done. It hasn’t always been easy because we are creating new approaches
as new issues and challenges arise. What started off with a few dedicated people has grown to an initiative involving
more than 120 people. You can see their names and many of their faces in the new progress report.

In the past two years, we’ve done many things to improve linguistic access including setting clear policies, providing
training and securing vendors. We are focusing this year on developing the techniques and tools for educating
managers and supervisors as well as front line staff on specific knowledge and skills for cross-cultural effectiveness.

I’m impressed that we haven’t just pulled the solutions off the shelf. We’ve dug deeper – to find what is known to
work and what fits with the needs of our organization in a variety of ways. For example, after attending a summit on
African-American health issues, I convened an ad hoc committee to develop recommendations for me on what we
can do to better address African-American health disparities. The group reflects what I’ve seen frequently in RHDI
efforts: people who are passionate committed to finding new solutions and willing to take risks.

Challenges

Our RHDI work has occurred during years of significant budget impacts and have been hindered by a lack of
resources and many distractions. The fact that the efforts have continued speaks to the importance of the work and
the commitment of our employees.

We’ve had our stops and starts along the way about how to structure the initiative, a major challenge in a
department as large and diverse as ours. Some counties are addressing the issue of health disparities only in their
hospitals. I don’t believe any other organization has taken as comprehensive an approach as we have. It has been
much more complex but much more valuable, addressing the issues in all areas of the department, and bringing in
points of view and stimulating conversations that otherwise might not have occurred.

Vision

RHDI is not superficial compliance with government mandated standards, but a long-term, organization-wide
commitment to make profound changes. My vision is that more names and faces will be added to the effort between
now and the next progress report, and that we’ll have a much longer list of accomplishments.

In the report, you’ll see a diagram developed by Chuck McKetney describing long- and short-term outcomes.
Bold initiatives don’t come without a bold vision – ours is the elimination of health disparities. In addition to focused
education, one of the next big efforts is to develop our evaluation approach. It is essential to measure improvements in
client satisfaction, access to treatment, and improvements in the environments of our most vulnerable patients,
clients and communities.

I feel this work to reduce, and eventually eliminate health disparities, is at the core of our mission. I look forward to
our continued work together. Thank you all for your dedication to the effort.

Sincerely,

William Walker, MD
Going the Extra Mile for Service Excellence

Honor Roll

Nursing Staff
5D Medical/Surgery
CCRMC

For recognizing the severity of a reaction to a new medication and quickly and appropriately responding to a life-threatening event. The team approach to caring for the patient was superb.

—Nominated by Dr. Kristin Moeller

Dr. Karen Burt
CCRMC

For her expertise and inspiration in facilitating training for Employment and Human Services’ In Home Supportive Services staff

—Nominated by William Weidinger, Employment and Human Services Department

Rita Cabeza
Community Health Worker

For working hard to communicate with parents in Spanish, translating written materials, making transportation arrangements, working closely with our social worker and nurse. She never says no and always has a great, enthusiastic attitude.

—Nominated by Claire Bauer

Ward Smedt
Financial Counselor

For always being there when needed to answer questions about Basic Health Care with courtesy, patience and a cheerful attitude.

—Nominated by Esther Gutierrez

Bismark Gonzalez
Financial Counselor

For assisting two elderly patients to obtain health care, and for being patient, caring and compassionate despite his very busy and stressful job.

—Nominated by Esther Gutierrez

Xochit Saldana
Community Health Worker
Child Health and Disability Prevention Program

For helping a client apply for Healthy Families insurance. Because of her assistance, the client and his family received the insurance.

—Nominated by James Acuna

Do you know someone who’s going the extra mile?

To recognize a CCHS employee, vendor or volunteer for outstanding Service Excellence performance, submit the “Going the Extra Mile” commendation form, available from every CCHS Division Director, or email your commendation to ServicEX@hsd.co.contra-costa.ca.us or fax it to 925-313-6219. The form can also be downloaded from the Internet (About Us page) or Intranet.

Employee Milestones

Congratulations to these employees who have given us long years of service: Darline Sanders, Ulysses De Los Santos, Vickey Dominguez, Tammy Walton (10 years); Yulanda Bowles, Hermie De Leon, Alice Dequilla, Felicia Walker, Elizabeth Godyear, Sonya Pye, Delia Gonzalez (15 years); Joginder Sikand, Pamela Dodson, Guadalupe Godoy, Cynthia Pagmanua, Karin Wonenberg (20 years); Mary Rayl (25 years); and Jill Churchman (30 years). (We know there are lots of other dedicated employees with long years of service. Because of space limitations, we are only reporting those with 10, 15, 20, 25, 30 and 35 years.)
This page brings news of how the implementation of the CCHS Plan for Reducing Health Disparities is progressing and highlights program efforts. Our divisions have been working on three key areas to reduce health disparities. These are improving linguistic access, implementing educational activities on diversity and cultural and linguistic competence, and developing an organizational climate that values patient, customer and employee diversity.

**RHDI Progress Hailed, Participants Honored**

We celebrated the accomplishments of our Reducing Health Disparities Initiative (RHDI) last month with the release of the **RHDI Progress Report and Plan for 2005 and 2006** and recognition of employee contributions. The report outlines our efforts over the past two years and our plans for continuing the work. Highlights of the report include our work to improve linguistic access and to increase cross-cultural effectiveness through staff trainings. Priorities for 2005 and 2006 include further developing the proficiency of interpreters, deepening our education and training activities and developing effective ways to measure our progress.

The full report is available online at cchealth.org or by calling Jackie Peterson at 925-957-5422 (7-5422) for copies. Information about the recognition awards and photos can be seen on our Intranet (type cchs in your browser). For more information about our Reducing Health Disparities Initiative, call RHDI leader José Martin at 925-957-5426 (7-5426).

**Complete Our Survey**

We are surveying staff members as to their experience with health disparities in Contra Costa and how we as a health agency deal with these disparities. The survey will be emailed to you, or you can access it online on the Intranet (type cchs in your browser).
**LINGUISTIC ACCESS** – Left to right, Ken Stuart, Environmental Health, accepts award on behalf of Vanessa Cordier, Environmental Health; Lindy Haagensen, CCRMC and Health Centers; Sherry Bradley, Mental Health; and Marta Rincon, Alcohol and Other Drugs Services.

**EDUCATION** – Left, Jeanne Walker-Johnson, CCRMC and Health Centers, and (third from the left) Wanda Session, Finance.

**LEADERSHIP** – Left to right, Lorena Martinez-Ochoa, Public Health; Susan Meltzer accepting award for Norma Martinez, CCRMC and Health Centers; Joanne Genêt, Public Health; Deborah Card, Public Health; Lisa Booker, Mental Health; and Otilia Tiutin, Contra Costa Health Plan.

**SPECIAL INITIATIVES** – Left to right, Ann Schnake accepting awards for herself and Mary Woolfolk, CCCRMC and Health Centers, ArtsChange; Odessa Stone, Contra Costa Health Plan; Amy Chao, Alcohol and Other Drugs Services; and Concepcion James, CCCRMC and Health Centers.

**SPECIAL INITIATIVES** – Pictured below are (back row, left to right) Sirlura Taylor, TB Program, Public Health; Tracey Rattray, Inclusion Work Group, Public Health; Alvaro Florez and Mariza Dimas, Pediatric Asthma Program, Public Health; (front row, left to right) Wendy Malone, TB Program, Public Health; Charlotte Dickson, Inclusion Work Group, Public Health; and Cheri Pies, Public Health.
Two Projects Win National Awards

The National Public Health Information Coalition has awarded two Gold Awards to us for our work in addressing a potential public health crisis and for our website. Competing against mostly state health departments from across the country, we won for “Thinking On Your Feet: Real-time Communication” for the Public Health Division’s response to a suspected Avian flu case this summer. Although the case proved not to be Avian flu, Public Health nurses, the Public Health Laboratory and our Communications Unit mobilized to respond. Communicable Disease Program Chief Francie Wise credits the comprehensive response to experience gained in a tabletop exercise conducted last spring to plan a coordinated response to a flu pandemic. Sixty people from a broad range of agencies participated in the event. Our website, cchealth.org, also won a Gold Award for its creativity and results. The site is now logging more than 50,000 visits each month.

For more information about the avian flu award, contact Francie Wise at 925-313-6740. For website information, contact Shawn Eyer at 925-313-6114.

CCRMC and Health Centers Go Filmless with Amazing Speed

CCRMC and Health Centers set out almost three years ago to install a PACS (Picture, Archiving and Communication) system throughout the Hospital and Health Centers Division that would eliminate the need to print X-ray films and courier them between our medical center and health centers locations. Going filmless is part of a the division’s objective to provide state of the art medical care to county residents. the division was able to go-live with PACS and stop producing x-ray films for most procedures in an astonishing seven days. We formed a team including Darrell Williams, Diagnostic Imaging Manager; Eugene Pakman, PACS Administrator; Dr. Peter Won, Chief Radiologist; and Dr. Steve Tremain, Director of System Redesign. Working with vendor AGFA Healthcare and our Information Systems staff, the team implemented a system this year allowing authorized users with access to a personal computer to view images and reports anywhere within our healthcare network. PACS makes it possible for one or more clinicians to immediately review X-ray results with patients, sometimes simultaneously from multiple locations. The transition to filmless was made in seven days. AGFA's Dave Nelson reports that only 16% of facilities accomplish that goal —- in a year. Stephanie R. Bailey, CCRMC Director of Ancillary Services, says the team installing the new system didn’t realize what an achievement the very short implementation time was. She credits the team and CCRMC and Health Centers providers who were open to this significant change and adapted amazingly well.

For more information, call Darrell Williams at 925-370-5321.

Home Visiting Liaison Helping Incarcerated Mothers-to-Be

Our Family, Maternal and Child Health Program, with funding from First 5 Contra Costa, is reaching out to incarcerated pregnant women and teens with a new home visiting program. Jeannie Cummings, the program’s Home Visiting Liaison, coordinates this first-of-its kind service in the county. “Working with incarcerated women is very challenging, but now we are better able to serve this very high-risk group,” she said. Jeannie typically visits up to 20 pregnant women at a time, often meeting with them twice a week. “We are fortunate to work closely with the nursing staff at the detention facilities and juvenile hall,” she added. “Without their cooperation, this program would not be possible.” Jeannie works with women to alleviate stress and serves as a link between the mothers and their family, social services, substance abuse treatments programs and probation officers. Once a mother is released from jail, Cummings visits her until she can facilitate the mother’s enrollment in another of our home visiting programs such as Prenatal Care Guidance, Home Baby or Black Infant Health.

Save the Date: Health Emergency Preparedness Film Festival

Our Public Health Division will host an all-day, drop-by emergency preparedness film festival (complete with popcorn and drawing for prizes) on Thursday, January 19 for all interested staff. Preceding each short film (under an hour), we will be showing the newly available Disaster Service Worker video. Look for more details in our December issue.
Environmental Health Chief Retires

Ken Stuart, Director of our [Environmental Health Division], retired last month after nine years with Health Services and a very long career in the field. But he isn’t going to be letting grass grow under his feet, because he’ll be joining the State’s Integrated Waste Management Board. He’ll be working on a statewide initiative to address illegal dumping, something he developed here in Contra Costa. At a recent [Board of Supervisors] meeting honoring him, Board President Gail B. Uilkema praised Ken for his “thoroughness and steadfast” positions. Supervisor Federal Glover said, “We have the finest staff in the state of California and your leadership has made this county shine.” Ken says he is most proud that our plan check system will soon be available online, the first in the state. By the first of the year, inspections of restaurants will also be on our website. Recruitment efforts are underway for a replacement, but Ken will be a hard act to follow!

HOPE Honored with National Award

A new project administered by [Homeless Programs] Director Cynthia Belon was honored with an Exemplary Program Award in a ceremony last month in Washington, D.C. The [Substance Abuse Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)] presented the award in recognition of Contra Costa’s Homeless Outreach Program for Encampments (HOPE). The project, which reflects the [10-Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness] is executed by a multidisciplinary team based in the Phoenix Programs and managed by Dr. Virginia Luchetti, the team psychologist and clinical director. Since being started with a SAMHSA grant four years ago, the team has contacted 4,600 people living in the uninhabitable conditions of homeless encampments in Contra Costa and provided basic assistance such as clothing and sleeping bags, plus placement into an emergency shelter or other interim housing and then permanent supportive housing. Other members of the team include “Nurse Al,” a Public Health Nurse from CCHS; Stacey Studebaker, a social worker and case manager from the Veterans’ Administration; and substance abuse specialists and peer outreach workers from the Phoenix Programs.

For more information, call Virginia Luchetti at 925-575-0566.

FMCH Chief One of 30 Activists Honored for Work on Women’s Health

Cheri Pies, Director of our [Family, Maternal and Child Health Programs] was honored recently for her groundbreaking work on women’s health throughout her career. The National Women’s Health Network cited Cheri as one of its “30 For The 30th” project celebrating the organization’s 30th year. In recognizing her, the organization said, “Cheri developed culturally sensitive and ethical guidelines for AIDS/HIV counseling during the early years of the AIDS epidemic. She has also developed ethical guidelines for using incentives in reproductive health programs; created home visiting programs for low-income families; and studied racial inequities in access to emergency contraception, and controversial issues related to adolescent Norplant use.” Congratulations Cheri!

Read more at [nwhn.org/30for30/index.php]

The Director’s Report is published monthly. Deadline for the December edition is November 10. Publicize your upcoming events and successes by sending information to Julie Freestone at 597 Center Avenue, Suite 255, Martinez 94553, fax 925-313-6219, email: jfreestone@hsd.co.contra-costa.ca.us. The Director’s Report is available online at cchealth.org and on the Intranet at cchs.
Environmental Health Gets Grant to Increase Tire Recycling Program
Thanks to continued funding from the California Integrated Waste Management Board, our Environmental Health Division is continuing to work with businesses across the county to prevent tires from being illegally dumped. One of 38 jurisdictions to receive a grant, staff are using the $298,841 to inventory and monitor the nearly 700 waste tire facilities in Contra Costa. California produces nearly 34 million waste tires a year. More than 75% are recycled, but that still leaves several million each year that are illegally dumped and pose fire hazards and health risks.

For more information, call our Environmental Health Programs Division at 925-646-5225.

CCHS Staff Continue Hurricane Relief Efforts
Touched by the suffering created by Hurricane Katrina, our staff continue to reach out to the survivors of the catastrophic storm that left hundreds of thousands of people homeless. Our Contra Costa Regional Medical Center and the CCRMC Auxiliary are raising money for Memorial Hospital in Gulfport, Miss. The hospital was damaged by the hurricane but remained open to care for patients. Our Community Education and Information unit and the Contra Costa Health Plan have been collecting money, clothing and household items for a New Orleans family who lost everything and relocated to Vallejo to be near relatives. CCHS Public Health Family Nurse Practitioner Terry Holbrook also has been deployed a second time to help with the relief efforts. In September, Terry went to Fort Rucker, Ala., near Biloxi to help manage the Disaster Medical Assistance Teams there. She currently is with the Disaster Medical Assistance Team in Cameron, La.

To let us know about other CCHS efforts to help Hurricane Katrina survivors or for more information about money being raised by CEI for the family, email or call Dan Smith at dsmith@hsd.cccounty.us or 925-313-6833. For more information about donations for Gulfport Memorial Hospital, email Maria Lopez at mlopez@hsd.co.contra-cost.ca.us or call her at 925-370-5597 or call the CCRMC Hospital Auxiliary at 925-370-5441.

County Food Drive On, Accepting Checks Too
The 2005 County Cup Challenge Holiday Food Drive begins November 14. The campaign helps the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano feed the hungry during the holidays and all year long. A committee of Health Services employees is coordinating our efforts this year with the goal of exceeding last year’s contributions by 15%. This year the Food Bank is asking especially for money donations because each dollar contributed allows them to distribute $6 worth of nutritious food. Watch for more information in an upcoming all staff message.

To help out with the Food Drive, please contact Jackie Peterson at jpeters2@hsd.cccounty.us, or call 925-957-5420.