

FROM THE GROUND UP

a publication of STUDENT ACTION WITH FARMWORKERS

VOLUME 8 , NUMBER 1

Spring 2000

Focus on Cultural Factors Affecting Mexican Farmworker Health

Mexican Health Beliefs

"Mexican health beliefs and behaviors are the result of the blending of the aboriginal healing practices of the Aztecs, Toltecs and Mayans, with the religious rituals of the Spanish explorers and the Greek humoral school of medicine, which was revived during the Spanish Renaissance. These roots have given Mexicans a deep appreciation for the mind-body-spirit connection, and the stated causes of cultural illness, as well as their cures, often reflect this" (Jimenez, 1995).

Culture plays an important role in health. It shapes and informs decisions about where one seeks health care, preferences as to how treatment should be administered and how one views health in general. Recognizing cultural beliefs is important to understanding the values of Mexican farmworkers and their use of and access to health care services.

Fatalism

Mexican culture places strong emphasis on fatalism and destiny. Fatalism is the belief that God or fate control one's life and that the individual is powerless to intervene. A strong belief in fatalism may reduce Mexican farmworkers' use of available health care.

Family

Families play an essential role in Mexican culture. Hispanic families tend to be very close, providing a strong support system for members. When illness arises, families play an important role in the health care decision-making of individuals. Families often decide on the seriousness of the illness, the type of treatment and determine who will provide that treatment. This type of involvement is highly valued.

continued on page 2

Introduction to Health

Culture, migration, marginality, poverty and the occupation of farm work all affect the health, healing and access to health care of Mexican farmworkers living in the United States. In this newsletter, we will discuss Mexican health beliefs and modes of healing, the effect of marginality on health and access to services, and how clinical health care can accommodate cultural difference.

Why Focus on the Health of Mexican Farmworkers?

- * 77% of all farmworkers are Mexican (NAWS 1997-98).
- * Available data indicates that Mexican farmworkers suffer extremely poor health, with morbidity and mortality rates greater than any other ethnic group in the U.S. (Migrant Health Task Force, 1991).
- * Migrant housing is consistently inadequate; among other housing problems, poor toilet facilities and sewage disposal jeopardize sanitation (Maxwell, 1987). 35.2% of farmworkers' housing lacked inside running water in eight major agricultural labor states in 1998 (NCFH).
- * Farmworkers experience one of the highest rates of occupational injuries and illness in the U.S., including green tobacco sickness, heat exhaustion, back strain, pesticide exposure and contact dermatitis (Whitehead, 1995). Up to 78% of all farmworkers suffer from parasitic infection, compared to 2 - 3 % of the general public (NCFH, 1998).
- * Many of the illnesses that farmworkers suffer from are vaccine preventable (NCFH, 1998).
- * Farmworkers face many barriers to health care, including lack of transportation, inability to communicate with clinic staff, clinic location, lack of knowledge of services, lack of insurance and requirements for immigration status (Migrant Health Task Force, 1991).
- * Infant mortality rates are considerably higher among Mexican migrant farmworkers than any other ethnic group (Public Voice for Food and Health Policy, 1989).

Also in this Issue . . .

Mexican Health Beliefs continued.....	2
Health Care Resources.....	3
Marginality As a Barrier to Health.....	4
Works Cited and Further Reading.....	4
Practical Steps.....	5
2000 Interns.....	6
SAF Thanks Our Donors.....	6
Get Involved with SAF.....	6

