

Script – Print – Working to overcome obstacles facing the Hispanic population

Graciela Botello needed a new doctor. Her long-time physician was retiring soon, and the 77-year-old Mendota, Illinois, resident was looking for someone who could not only address her pulmonary fibrosis and other health issues, but who could speak her language – Spanish.

She found that in Maritza Estrada-O'Brien, MD, who is not only Hispanic, but quite familiar with the struggles many of her Hispanic patients experience when it comes to their well-being.

Botello previously knew Dr. Estrada-O'Brien, which made the transition easier.

"For me to know her and knowing that she's Spanish is good because my English is just okay," Botello says. "Sometimes there are words that I can't pronounce, or I don't understand. So, when I ask her something in Spanish, she helps me a lot. And this is good for all the Spanish people in Mendota. They feel comfortable."

Dr. Estrada-O'Brien works at OSF HealthCare Saint Paul Medical Center in Mendota, a small town in northern Illinois, where 26% of its 7,000 residents are Hispanic. The hospital has five Hispanic physicians and nurse practitioners, some of whom were born and raised in Mendota.

"We're fortunate enough that we have a lot of Spanish speaking providers, and I do think that providers who practice in a community should reflect the population in this area – we do have a higher percentage of Spanish speaking patients," she says. "I think that has us better equipped to take care of the population. Language barriers as simple as making a phone call to make an appointment can be challenging. Getting your results by being more understanding of your medical conditions is much harder if you don't understand the primary language that your provider speaks. So just being able to speak even a little bit of Spanish is better for patients because they have a better understanding of their medical conditions before they become a problem."

But a language barrier is just the tip of the iceberg. Dr. Estrada-O'Brien is well versed in the challenges facing those of Hispanic heritage. In fact, she researched many of the issues during her residency program and has been involved in many projects regarding disparities among Hispanics since becoming a physician.

"The state of health among the Latino population depends on location, specifically in rural Illinois," she says. "Latinos or the Hispanic population are at a disadvantage from a health equity standpoint, from a health status standpoint, more so because of access and disparities in health care. It puts Latinos at higher risk for a lower health status. It's mostly because of social determinants of health – access, quality of health care, insurance coverage, language, immigration status, all of which present obstacles with attaining health care."

Among common health issues for the Hispanic population are diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol, which can lead to heart disease, cancer and stroke. For example, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Hispanics are 50% more likely to die from diabetes or liver disease than non-Hispanic whites. And the number of Hispanics who have died from Alzheimer's disease has risen in the past decade. Genetics, diet, obesity and Type 2 diabetes are thought to be significant risk factors for the spike in Alzheimer's cases.

Experts say problems arise due to a combination of factors including diet, lifestyle and genetics. And if these problems aren't addressed early, they can cause severe complications down the road. That's why early detection and screenings, such as cancer and bone density, are so important.

But that can be difficult, especially if a patient won't seek care in the first place. In general, men are less likely to visit a doctor than women, but it's a far more complex issue with Hispanic men, according to Joy Preciado, a nurse practitioner with OSF HealthCare.

"Many of the men are the head of household and they don't want to take time off work to come in and be seen," says Preciado, who was born and raised in Mendota. "A lot of them say they feel well, so they don't want to come in. Unfortunately, down the line that can lead to diabetes, high blood pressure, things that can be prevented. But if they did a once-a-year checkup they could catch things before they get worse."

Graciela Botello knows this all too well. She's personally had family members who didn't seek proper treatment for cancer and eventually died. Now she tries to educate friends and family about the importance of seeking medical care and practicing self-care.

"When men turn 40, they should go to the doctor to have their prostate checked and women should check their breasts at 30, because you can have cancer and sometimes it can be bad," she says. "And if you don't check yourself out, you can die from it."

Leonardo Lopez, MD, is the medical director for OSF HealthCare Saint Paul Medical Center. He says organizations like OSF HealthCare can lead the charge in not only ensuring quality care for Hispanics but educating them about career opportunities in the medical field where Hispanic representation is lacking.

"We need to encourage communities that have those populations who may be underserved," Dr. Lopez says. "We should encourage them to go to school, get educated and become physicians or providers or nurses. To go into health care will help that need that we have and provide that care and trust that the community needs within their health care systems."

People like Dr. Estrada-O'Brien, who is also a Mendota native. For her, practicing medicine in her hometown means more than just treating patients. It's serving as an example for others who also aspire to make a difference – especially among the Hispanic population.

"I'm fortunate that people from Mendota want to stay in Mendota and help the community," she says. "I hope that I can be some type of role model, someone for kids from the area to look up to. I've already had many students come back and spend time with me, so they can get an idea of what it's like to be in medicine."

OSF HealthCare offers a variety of assistive services for individuals with limited English proficiency by providing interpretation, translation and other aides to patients and their loved ones at no cost. For more information, visit [OSF HealthCare](#).