

# Cancer check: Promotoras reach Hispanics

An NMSU study suggests that promotoras—neighborhood level Spanish-speaking lay health workers or promoters—can significantly boost colorectal cancer screening participation among older, low-income Hispanics.

The two-year examination of residents 50 to 79 years old living near La Clínica de Familia in the far southern New Mexico communities of Chaparral and Anthony found that promotoras played a key role in explaining the importance of early detection of colorectal cancer, detailing what would happen during the screening process and ultimately getting people in the clinic door.

During the study, 348 neighborhood residents were screened, representing about a third of the potential target population, says

Ann Bock, a human nutrition professor at NMSU. The doctors found 4.8 percent tested positive for blood in the gastrointestinal tract, one of the signs that the health care workers were looking for during their initial colorectal cancer screening.

“Ultimately, 33 individuals were referred for more extensive colorectal cancer testing,” she says.

Colorectal cancer has long been an ailment that has remained unmentioned, primarily because of the body part it affects. But this whispered disease will claim 57,000 lives this year in the United States alone.

“Certain minority populations are more prone to colorectal cancer, and one of those is Hispanics,” Bock says. “Hispanics are also part of a population group that does not seek health care as often or get

preventive health screenings as frequently compared with other population groups. That’s why we turned inside the community for help in increasing these colorectal screening levels.”

The study was funded by the National Cancer Institute.

The NMSU research team chose the promotora model because of its success in close-knit Hispanic communities. The promotoras were from the local community and often knew the patient’s family, Bock said. In addition, they spoke the same language and were of a similar age.

“Sometimes it was very hard to convince them to come into the clinic,” says Delia Martinez, a promotora at Chaparral’s La Clínica de Familia. “Having brochures in Spanish along with life-size models of colon polyps really helped explain the purposes of the screening test. Both opened doors to people’s minds.”

As part of the experiment, an introductory letter explaining the colorectal screening program was mailed by the promotoras. This was followed up with phone calls and in some cases home visits.

“We found this model to be very effective,” Bock says. “In this case, people didn’t go to the health care source. It came to them.”

Another method of community participation came in the form of posters and radio public service announcements, as well as area health fairs, where an award-winning colorectal screening brochure developed by NMSU and the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center was distributed.

The Spanish and English handout provided patient instructions for taking a



Screening test: Ann Bock, left, a human nutrition professor at NMSU, and Delia Martinez, a promotora at Chaparral’s La Clínica de Familia, review an award-winning colorectal cancer screening poster developed by NMSU and the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center.

three-part test. The screening, known as a fecal occult blood test, uses a chemical process to check the stool for hidden blood.

Bock's goal now is to continue

refining NMSU's colorectal literature, radio spots and posters for more minority groups to improve screening rates. "In almost every kind of disease situation if you

can prevent it or catch it early, the costs associated with health care are going to be much less than at an advanced stage," she says.

*Norman Martin*

## Fighting gangs, drug abuse

Drug abuse and gang violence surged in Carlsbad a year ago.

Two police officers were wounded, and seven murders were linked to drugs and gangs. Widespread graffiti marked gang territory.

Parents and community members fought back. A coalition organized an anti-graffiti blitz, an 800-person prayer walk and a police tip line, advertised on electronic signs and billboards.

"The community is changing what is considered normal," says Woods Houghton, Eddy County agricultural agent for NMSU's Cooperative Extension Service. Houghton wrote a letter to the editor in late 2003 that led to formation of the Carlsbad Community Coalition Drug/Gang Task Force.

"If this school district and community do not come together to stop drug abuse, it will kill our future," Houghton wrote. "I have faith that this is a community of good people who will not stand by and watch the murder of innocent lives, dreams and aspirations."

Houghton leads the coalition's community board, which oversees nine action groups. He also formed a support group for parents of troubled children that offers "emotional support with practical advice, an open ear and free coffee."

Carlsbad Mayor Bob Forrest says drug and gang problems affect every community, and involving influential people like Houghton leads to solutions. "The best thing is getting the

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Fighting back: Members of the Carlsbad Community Coalition Drug/Gang Task Force and other residents are taking a stand against crime in their community.

community involved."

Robert Sullivan, commander of the Pecos Valley Drug Task Force, says the coalition helped police conduct a successful drug raid Feb. 3 in Carlsbad.

Police were aided by the information flow from the people on the street since the coalition started, Sullivan says. "A percentage of those calls always have that nugget of information we need." Sullivan adds that in his three-decade police career, he's never seen as much community reaction as he did in the week after the drug raid, when police received about 100 calls of support a day.

People were working on the drug and gang problem in Carlsbad before the coalition began, but "it was like spilling a

bag of marbles on the floor: Everyone was going in different directions," Houghton says. "Now we're all headed in the right direction. The results will be greater than the sum of the parts because of our cooperative efforts."

The coalition just surveyed 600 Carlsbad students about problems they face, says Joe Epstein, a founding member who serves on its leadership group.

Next, programs will be developed to counter those problems. With help from the Carlsbad coalition, Artesia leaders organized a similar group. Forrest met with Gov. Bill Richardson, and the governor wants to make the Carlsbad coalition a pilot project for the state.

*Darrell J. Pehr*

# Support for first-time moms

Samuel Breckon is a happy, enthusiastic 2-year-old with chubby cheeks and red hair who likes toy cars, spending time with his mom and being the center of attention.

But when he was an infant, Samuel struggled to maintain his weight, alarming his parents and doctor. "He was having trouble keeping his formula down," says Sarah Harrington, a nurse who suggested Samuel's mother, Sue, try breast-feeding.

That did the trick. Soon Samuel was gaining weight and, with Harrington's continued guidance, hasn't had any health problems since.

"She helped me get through a lot of things," Sue Breckon said. "I had no idea at all how to take care of a baby. Her help was really lifesaving."

Harrington started a visiting nurse program in 2001 for first-time mothers in Lea County through NMSU's Cooperative Extension Service. As the program draws to a close, the results are evident in healthy children and their appreciative mothers.

"Sarah became like my second mother," says Janet Garcia, a Lovington resident whose daughter, Delilah, just turned 3.

Harrington, a registered nurse, visits each of the nine mothers in the program once a week and is available for phone consultations.

"Being a new mom, I was scared of everything," says Alma Ramos of Hobbs, whose daughter, Makenzie, was born in 2002. "Every little thing my child would do, I would call Sarah to find out if it was normal or not normal."

Ramos has used advice from Harrington to help her friends and family members. "They learned a lot from what I learned," Ramos says.

DARRELL J. PEHR



Healthy children, happy parents: Guidance from a visiting nurse program in Lea County helped Sue Breckon handle health problems her son, Samuel, faced as an infant. In 2001, registered nurse Sarah Harrington, below, started a visiting nurse program for first-time mothers through NMSU's Cooperative Extension Service.

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In addition to the part-time parenting program, Harrington works as a nurse at Lea Regional Medical Center in Hobbs. For several years, she worked in the postpartum/surgical and infant care unit, teaching breast-feeding and parenting classes.

She became involved in the visiting nurse program thanks to Diana Del Campo, Extension

child development and family life specialist, and Ruth Jones, former longtime Lea County home economics agent, who recognized the need and secured a grant.

Harrington developed a curriculum including her interest and expertise in the benefits of breast-feeding.

"I teach them ways to take care of their child, how to prevent minor colds and sicknesses," Harrington says. Breast-feeding can do a lot to help achieve those goals, and is especially effective in avoiding respiratory ailments, she says.

"I never had trouble with my baby," Garcia says. "She's never been sick." Harrington recently added to her training in breast-feeding by becoming an International Board Certified Lactation Consultant. She is one of only 51 people in New Mexico holding this certification for breast-feeding and lactation care.

"I am so blessed to have this

opportunity to have some of the needed credentials to get into the homes and schools of my community and teach needed skills to moms," Harrington says. After

the program ends in May, Harrington plans to continue spreading the word about the benefits of breast-feeding. She hopes the good results she's

achieved through the Extension program will open other opportunities to help families raise healthy babies.

*Darrell J. Pehr*

## Protecting fresh-picked produce

While crops are covered by an abundance of safe pesticide application laws, few guidelines address safe production and handling of fresh produce. To prevent bacterial contamination, NMSU's Cooperative Extension Service has launched a "good agricultural practices" program, GAPs for short.

Critical control points include irrigation water sources for vegetable crops, clean water movement in relation to animal operations and manure use methods. Other key factors are worker sanitation, along with produce handling and packing.

"Fresh vegetable produce contamination can occur anywhere along the farm-to-fork chain," says Nancy Flores, an Extension food technology specialist. "That's why this GAPs program is a much needed tool to reduce microbial contamination on the farm."

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the impact of foodborne diseases on health in the United States is considerable.

"GAPs is a good, common sense approach that fresh vegetable growers can utilize to meet consumer concerns and awareness about food safety," says Roy Pennock, a research specialist with NMSU's GAPs project. "Currently, our main focus is on commercial growers who contract

with food processors."

Among the program's elements are step-by-step assessments of a grower's operation from planting to harvest to determine possible contamination points, he says. Included in this review is an emphasis on lot identification and record keeping, in addition to trace-back tracking, which is increasingly

important to commercial food processors.

Clear, precise documentation of all management areas, along with written standard operating procedures for food safety are also important, Pennock says. This includes training workers in sanitation and safe handling procedures.

*Norman Martin*



Closing GAPs: Vince Hernandez, left, a production coordinator for Las Cruces-based Biad Chili, reviews a new "good agricultural practices" program involving chile and other fresh vegetables with Roy Pennock, a research specialist with NMSU's Cooperative Extension Service.