

HCFA Study to Determine Best Ways to Reach Latino Beneficiaries

By Houkje Ross

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Statistics from the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) have shown that the Agency's Medicare handbook for Latino and Hispanic populations is not reaching many beneficiaries. The handbook outlines health plan choices under Medicare and helps beneficiaries choose a plan. There were less than 100 requests for the handbook throughout the U.S. between 1998 and 1999, according to David Miranda, PhD, social science research analyst with HCFA's Center for Beneficiary Services. To pinpoint why Hispanic and Latino beneficiaries are not using the Handbook, HCFA's Center for Beneficiary Services is sponsoring research to assess the needs of these populations.

"We are concerned that vulnerable populations get the information they need to make informed choices," Dr. Miranda said.

"We want to make sure they are making the right choices with the information we provide them. The small number of requests for the publication, Medicare y Ustedes, prompted us to study whether or not there is a problem," he said.

The study, *Development and testing of Medicare quality performance materials for Hispanic/Latino beneficiaries and the intermediaries serving them*, is being carried out by two private research and consulting companies. Information will be collected on the cultural factors that may create barriers for Hispanics and Latinos and to help HCFA find the most useful information for its beneficiaries.

Focus groups with friends and families

Beneficiaries will be interviewed to gain an understanding of how current Spanish-language health plans are being used. Focus groups will also be held with friends and family members. According to Miranda, this will enable HCFA to learn:

- the context in which Hispanic and Latino beneficiaries think about health care and make decisions;

- when and how these beneficiaries make decisions;
- who is or could be most helpful to Hispanics/Latinos in choosing how to get their health care.

Organizations and agencies that serve as intermediaries will also be interviewed to identify their role in the decision and education process of beneficiaries and to look at how well HCFA is doing in supporting them.

The study will consider the following questions:

- How do preferences compare to those of the general beneficiary population?
- What health care information is of most interest to the above groups?
- How do these preferences compare to those of the general beneficiary population?
- Would providing information to Hispanics/Latinos about diseases in which there are known racial and ethnic disparities make information more meaningful?
- Cultural and linguistic appropriateness and communication of health care information will also be examined.

Questions for this aspect of the study may include:

- What are the culturally and linguistically appropriate ways of communicating with Hispanic/Latino populations?
- What health practices and beliefs influence the communication of health care information to these populations?
- In what ways is cultural and linguistic appropriateness affected by beneficiary characteristics like income, or urban v. rural residence?

The study will review marketing and social science research literature and communication for Hispanic and Latino populations to see if the same principles apply. This will include looking at how culture and language may impact information processing and health and information seeking behaviors.

HCFA will use the results of the study to make policy decisions and to determine whether it should customize the Medicare handbook it sends out to Hispanic and Latino populations. The study will be completed in the next year and a half, according to Dr. Miranda.

For more information, contact David Miranda, 410-786-7819. ❖

National Council on Interpretation in Health Care (NCIHC)

The NCIHC promotes culturally competent professional medical interpretation as a way to support equal access to health care for individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP). The NCIHC works to:

- define and support standards of quality health care for LEPs;
- support standards and a code of ethics for interpreters in health care;
- monitor the development of policies, research, and model practices;
- sponsor a dialogue of diverse voices and interests on related issues.

For more information, contact: NCIHC, 750 Washington Street, NEMC Box 271, Boston, MA 02111. ❖

