

HEALTH through ACTION



WEST MICHIGAN—West Michigan Asian American Association, Inc.

About 14,000 Asian Americans live in Western Michigan's Kent County, including people from Vietnam, Korea, the Philippines, India, Japan and China, and more recently refugees from Burma and Nepal. While these Asian Americans make up just two percent of the population of Grand Rapids and other parts of Kent County, they face a disproportionate burden of certain diseases.

Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders account for more than 50 percent of the hepatitis B cases nationwide and the trends are the same in Western Michigan. They also have higher than average rates of lung and other types of cancer, diabetes, tuberculosis and HIV.

EMPHASIS ON ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE

With funding from a national program called Health Through Action (HTA) the West Michigan Asian American Association, Inc. (WMAAA) is working to reduce health disparities with a mix of programs that help Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders navigate the often confusing U.S. health care system, says Executive Director Minnie Morey. WMAAA, formerly known as the Asian Health Outreach Foundation, was renamed in 2011 when it merged with the Asian Professionals Organization, a not-for-profit corporation based in Michigan.

TACKLING LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Nationwide, 36 percent of Asian Americans have difficulty communicating in English, a problem that can make it hard for people to navigate in the United States, particularly in accessing employment, education and medical care. In fact, when health providers and patients are unable to communicate effectively, errors in diagnosis or treatment can occur and result in potentially serious consequences for patients, Morey said.

In addition, quality of care can suffer when health care providers are not trained to recognize or understand cultural differences or beliefs. For example, many Asian Americans are reluctant to express even intense pain, a problem that can interfere with a treatment course for cancer and other

Photos (l to r): Minnie Morey, Executive Director, West Michigan Asian American Association; translators for Liaison Linguistics, a firm which provides interpretation services in Grand Rapids, Michigan; last two images of students attending a certification class for medical translators. All photographs © Adam Stoltman.

**A PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM FUNDED BY WK KELLOGG FOUNDATION
TO CLOSE HEALTH GAPS FOR ASIAN AMERICANS, NATIVE HAWAIIANS AND PACIFIC ISLANDERS**

HEPATITIS B IS A SERIOUS INFECTION OF THE LIVER AND LEADING CAUSE OF LIVER CANCER: ASIAN AMERICANS, NATIVE HAWAIIANS AND PACIFIC ISLANDERS ACCOUNT FOR MORE THAN 50 PERCENT OF THE HEPATITIS B CASES IN THE UNITED STATES.

health problems. Health providers who are not trained in the provision of culturally sensitive care might not recognize the disconnect and thus fail to prescribe appropriate pain medication, Morey said.

Patient perceptions about the origins of disease and the appropriateness of treatment can vary from one culture to the next, she said. Physicians, nurses, social workers and others who work in a health care setting often miss the subtle signs that patients do not understand what they are saying about a diagnosis or hold a cultural belief that is at odds with a treatment plan.

To help bridge the cultural and language issues, WMAAA operates a Patient Navigator program with bilingual Asian American volunteers who help community members obtain medical care in a health care system dominated by English-speaking providers who have not been trained to provide culturally sensitive care. "Patient navigators break the barrier of language and culture by guiding patients through the U.S. medical system," said Morey. "But these advocates also help patients organize transportation to the clinic, get health insurance and overcome other obstacles to getting care."

WMAAA now has 15 patient navigators who have helped Asian Americans establish a relationship with a primary care doctor, in some cases for the first time. "Primary care delivered in an office or clinic can prevent the development of chronic diseases," Morey said. "Hundreds of Asian Americans in Michigan are now healthier as a result of this program."

PROVIDING HEALTH EDUCATION AND SCREENING TESTS

In collaboration with local organizations, WMAAA holds health fairs and workshops to educate the community about the high risk for hepatitis B and other diseases that if identified and treated at an early stage can be much less serious, Morey said. For example, she says many Asian Americans do not realize they are at high risk for hepatitis B and do not have symptoms until later in life. "If you do not get a screening test for this disease you cannot get treatment," Morey said. "And by the time you are in your forties the disease has progressed and now you have liver cancer."



Tuberculosis screening at Health Department in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Health fairs also educate the population on the risk for other diseases like cancer, tuberculosis, HIV and Type 2 diabetes. "We have very high rates of cancer in our community and that can be overwhelming at times," Morey said. "But we take this health problem and others affecting our community one step at a time." In this way, the group hopes to not just educate the population but to empower residents to obtain the care they need to prevent diseases and live a longer, healthier life.

CONNECTING ASIAN AMERICANS TO HEALTH INSURANCE

Nationally, more than one in six Asian Americans are uninsured. "Many Asian Americans in this area work in grocery stores or in restaurants and do not get health benefits," Morey said.

Some will qualify for expansions in Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act and others will be able to purchase health insurance at affordable rates under the new insurance exchanges created by the law. The law also enables young adults to obtain coverage if they have a parent who has health insurance. With the HTA grant, WMAAA will host a series of educational workshops to educate the community about the Affordable Care Act and its expansion of Medicaid and other options that will help Asian Americans obtain health services.

Such expansions will offer a crucial safety net for the most vulnerable members of these communities. "I was talking to a young Vietnamese woman who is not eligible for Medicaid coverage now," Morey says adding that this woman and others like her might gain coverage in 2014, the year the Medicaid expansion kicks in. "Insurance coverage might help this young women obtain the tests and health services she needs to maintain good health."

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