

Pharr center director calls for better medical care

By CELIA LONGORIA
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The administrator of a Pharr health center cited a need for effective health promotion and disease prevention programs in the Hispanic community in the Rio Grande Valley during the annual convention of the National Council of La Raza held in Houston this week.

During a workshop on border health issues, Frank Vasquez, executive director of the Hidalgo County Health Care Corp., said 90 percent of Hidalgo County residents are uninsured for medical and health services.

"This is not surprising when one considers that Hidalgo County ranks among the lowest with respect to socioeconomic status, per capita income, educational attainment, employment and health status," he said.

He said Hidalgo County is home to approximately 208,727 farmworkers.

"Their poverty, exposure to hazardous pesticides and other dangerous working conditions impose serious health risks," he said.

Vasquez said that of the 546 colonias along the 16 Texas border area counties, 366 are located in Hidalgo County.

"Approximately 60,000 residents in these colonias live in dire sanitary conditions which give rise to Third World diseases which stem from contaminated water and substandard, or lack of, sewage facilities," Vasquez said.

Vasquez said that as a result, the area has experienced an increased incidence of gastrointestinal diseases and



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Frank Vasquez

communicable diseases, such as hepatitis and tuberculosis.

In 1990, there were 272 new cases of tuberculosis in Cameron, Hidalgo,

Starr, Zapata and Webb counties.

He also contributed the increase of diseases to the degradation of water quality caused by pollution from human wastes and disposal of industrial and agricultural hazardous and toxic materials.

"Industries on both sides of the river are known to discharge hazardous and toxic materials into the river," he said.

Vasquez said one source of hazardous waste is the *maquiladoras*.

"The environmental standards and enforcement priorities in Mexico are lower than those in the U.S., which often leads to improper disposal of hazardous and toxic materials," Vasquez said.

Allen E. Smith, an attorney for the *maquiladoras*, disagrees with those claims.

"I doubt that any significant portion of the illnesses could be contributed to the *maquiladoras*," Smith said.

Smith admits Mexico does not have the resources to police the law as stringently as the U.S.

However, he says the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency provides personnel who assists in policing the border dual plants.

"There is a long history of pollution by the Mexican industry," Smith said. "But the Mexican government is becoming very strict on the subject."

Meanwhile, Vasquez also said there is an increased incidence of cervical cancer.

He said Hispanic women in four counties, including Cameron, Hidalgo, Webb and Willacy have three times the

risk.

There is an increase in the number of patients infected with the HIV virus, Vasquez said.

He said that according to the Valley Aids Council in Harlingen, between 3,000 to 5,000 individuals in the Valley are infected with the virus.

Speaking on access to health care, Vasquez said there is a reluctance on the part of local hospitals to admit indigent patients.

Carlos Milanes, an spokesperson for McAllen Medical Center said that every patient that shows up in the emergency room must, by law, be treated.

Milanes said the hospital has given out approximately \$4 million of free care for the first six months of 1991.

Vasquez also cited a need for more primary care physicians. Vasquez said there is a need for at least 65 primary care physicians.

"Primary care is the basic foundation of any health care system," he said. "Primary care clinicians play a pivotal role in prevention."

He said that because of a nursing shortage, health care institutions are providing incentives to help attract nurses to the area.

Vasquez also said dental care providers in Hidalgo County can only meet 17 percent of the need.

"This profile among health care shortage is all too common along the border area," Vasquez said.

He said more active steps are needed to help increase Hispanic enrollment in medical schools.