

BRIEF COMMUNICATION

Cancer Feasibility Studies Among Migrant Farmworkers

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Some four years ago, the *Journal* published a review of the epidemiologic literature on cancer among migrant farmworkers [Zahm and Blair, 1993]. Despite the fact that farmworkers are regularly exposed to potentially carcinogenic pesticides and other agricultural exposures, often starting at early ages when susceptibility might be great, little research exists on their cancer risk. Descriptive data and etiologic research on cancer among farmworkers and family members are urgently needed. The review noted, however, that perceived difficulties in conducting epidemiologic investigations among migrant farmworkers may have stymied research.

As part of a National Cancer Institute research program on agricultural health, we identified several issues requiring solutions before initiation of full-scale etiologic investigations of cancer. To address the feasibility issues, we have joined forces with persons across the United States who have the interest, experience, expertise, and willingness to collaborate to resolve matters that are hindering epidemiologic research on farmworkers.

Through funding from the National Cancer Institute and the Migrant Health Branch of the Bureau of Primary Health Care, Health Resources and Services Administration, projects are underway to evaluate the accuracy of death-certificate data on occupation, race, ethnicity, and cause of death for farmworkers; to test the ability to trace farmworkers over extended periods (e.g., ten or more years); to assess whether current or former farmworkers are diagnosed and treated for cancer and entered into cancer registries or other relevant databases as the general population; to develop a standardized questionnaire to administer to farmworkers; to evaluate the reliability over time of occupational history reporting by farmworkers and by their spouses; and to assess the ability of agricultural experts to reconstruct lifetime probable exposure histories from farmworker accounts of states of employment, crops, and activities by month and year. We are also pilot testing the addition of epidemiologic variables (e.g., smoking history) to a national database of information collected from persons who apply for assistance from farmworker employment and training agencies. Investigators from approximately 20 institutions are working together to develop and pretest a questionnaire to obtain farmworkers' lifetime occupational histories and to design methods to translate the information into probable exposure histories.

Within a year, this array of feasibility projects should be complete. The findings and the questionnaire will be made available to other interested researchers and we hope this

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will promote an increased number of epidemiologic studies among farmworkers. Farmworkers, upon whom this country depends for its abundant food supply, deserve our attention and best efforts to ensure their health and safety.

REFERENCES

- Zahm SH, Blair A (1993): Cancer among migrant and seasonal farmworkers: An epidemiologic review and research agenda. *Am J Ind Med* 24:753-766.