

# FROM THE GROUND UP

a publication of STUDENT ACTION WITH FARMWORKERS

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## Focus on Cultural Factors Affecting Mexican Farmworker Health

### Mexican Health Beliefs

"Mexican health beliefs and behaviors are the result of the blending of the aboriginal healing practices of the Aztecs, Toltecs and Mayans, with the religious rituals of the Spanish explorers and the Greek humoral school of medicine, which was revived during the Spanish Renaissance. These roots have given Mexicans a deep appreciation for the mind-body-spirit connection, and the stated causes of cultural illness, as well as their cures, often reflect this" (Jimenez, 1995).

Culture plays an important role in health. It shapes and informs decisions about where one seeks health care, preferences as to how treatment should be administered and how one views health in general. Recognizing cultural beliefs is important to understanding the values of Mexican farmworkers and their use of and access to health care services.

#### Fatalism

Mexican culture places strong emphasis on fatalism and destiny. Fatalism is the belief that God or fate control one's life and that the individual is powerless to intervene. A strong belief in fatalism may reduce Mexican farmworkers' use of available health care.

#### Family

Families play an essential role in Mexican culture. Hispanic families tend to be very close, providing a strong support system for members. When illness arises, families play an important role in the health care decision-making of individuals. Families often decide on the seriousness of the illness, the type of treatment and determine who will provide that treatment. This type of involvement is highly valued.

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### Introduction to Health

Culture, migration, marginality, poverty and the occupation of farm work all affect the health, healing and access to health care of Mexican farmworkers living in the United States. In this newsletter, we will discuss Mexican health beliefs and modes of healing, the effect of marginality on health and access to services, and how clinical health care can accommodate cultural difference.

### Why Focus on the Health of Mexican Farmworkers?

- \* 77% of all farmworkers are Mexican (NAWS 1997-98).
- \* Available data indicates that Mexican farmworkers suffer extremely poor health, with morbidity and mortality rates greater than any other ethnic group in the U.S. (Migrant Health Task Force, 1991).
- \* Migrant housing is consistently inadequate; among other housing problems, poor toilet facilities and sewage disposal jeopardize sanitation (Maxwell, 1987). 35.2% of farmworkers' housing lacked inside running water in eight major agricultural labor states in 1998 (NCFH).
- \* Farmworkers experience one of the highest rates of occupational injuries and illness in the U.S., including green tobacco sickness, heat exhaustion, back strain, pesticide exposure and contact dermatitis (Whitehead, 1995). Up to 78% of all farmworkers suffer from parasitic infection, compared to 2 - 3 % of the general public (NCFH, 1998).
- \* Many of the illnesses that farmworkers suffer from are vaccine preventable (NCFH, 1998).
- \* Farmworkers face many barriers to health care, including lack of transportation, inability to communicate with clinic staff, clinic location, lack of knowledge of services, lack of insurance and requirements for immigration status (Migrant Health Task Force, 1991).
- \* Infant mortality rates are considerably higher among Mexican migrant farmworkers than any other ethnic group (Public Voice for Food and Health Policy, 1989).

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### Cultural values

Modesty is particularly important for women. Mexican farmworker women may find the presence of a male nurse or physician during an examination difficult. Values of *respeto* (respect), *confianza* (trust) and *personalismo* (personal warmth) are important for day to day interactions.

### Folk Illnesses

Folk illnesses are defined by traditional illnesses etiologies, ie: symptoms, causes and cures that are not based on Western disease classifications. Modern medicine often discounts these illnesses, as their existence is difficult to prove and understand through traditional scientific explanations. Folk illnesses are usually specific to a particular culture and reflect the holistic nature of health. There are a number of folk illnesses that exist among Mexican farmworkers. They include *Mal de Ojo*, *Empacho*, *Caída de la mollera* and *Susto*. Some of these illnesses illicit symptoms similar to illnesses recognized by biomedicine and others do not.

*Mal de ojo* (evil eye) can affect any individual, but has a particularly powerful influence on children, pregnant women and their babies. *Mal de ojo* places a curse on the victim and can cause high fever, headache, anxiety, and/or crying spells. The curse of *Mal de ojo* can be passed intentionally or inadvertently by almost anyone.

The most common way it is passed is by staring with admiration or envy at an individual or at a particular feature of the individual, such as admiring another's eyes or hair. *Mal de ojo* may also be passed by complimenting a particular feature. When someone is found to be suffering from *Mal de ojo*, the first action the family takes is to try and identify the individual who may have caused it and to have this person touch the victim in order to remove the curse. If this is not possible, egg-rolling is said to cure the victim. An intact, raw egg is rolled over the victim's skin in order to draw out the evil eye.

*Empacho* (blocked intestine) affects mostly infants, children and women. It is said to occur when a bolus of food becomes stuck to the lining of the stomach or intestine. Symptoms include abdominal pain, anorexia, nausea, and vomiting. Massage and herbal cathartics are used to treat *empacho*.

*Caída de la mollera* (fallen fontanelle) can affect an infant before the anterior fontanelle (soft area on top of an infant's head) has closed. It is caused by bouncing the baby or taking the baby's mouth off the nipple too quickly or too roughly, or by the baby having fallen. Symptoms include diarrhea, irritability, poor sucking ability, and in some cases a depressed fontanelle. *Caída* is treated with prayers and egg rolling over the skull, applications of warm, salted olive oil to the fontanelle or by pressing upward on the baby's hard palate.

"*Susto* is considered to be caused by a frightening experience. A startling experience may cause the departure of the soul from the body, resulting in symptoms such as loss of appetite, listlessness, and lack of motivation to carry on normal daily activities" (Baer and Penzell, 1993). Application of herbs, foods or other substances to the ill person are used in healing, with the goal of restoring balance to the body. From an investigation in 1989, Baer and Penzell found that in a Florida pesticide incident, some Mexican farmworkers interpreted a serious incident of pesticide poisoning to have preceded *Susto*. It was shown that 23% of those treated for pesticide poisoning believed that the fright they experienced from the incident caused an onset of *Susto*.

### Curanderismo

As well as these various folk illnesses, a number of folk healers exist among Mexican culture. *Curanderismo* is the generic term given to folk-healing methods practiced by Mexicans. The term *curanderismo* comes from the Spanish verb *curar*, which means to heal.

*Curanderos* are an important source of healing as they emphasize a holistic approach that is intrinsic to Mexican health beliefs. They place a strong emphasis on the social, emotional, psychological and spiritual facets of illness. Folk healing practitioners fall into several specialties: *parteras* practice midwifery; *yerberos* are herbal specialists; *sobadores* treat sprains; and *curanderos* treat illnesses caused by physical, supernatural, spiritual and emotional forces.

*Curanderos* either work on a material, spiritual or mental level to treat their patients. When they are working on the material level (as opposed to being in a trance) *curanderos* use many types of objects and rituals to heal. They use herbs, eggs, lemons and garlic and religious or mystical symbols, such as water, perfumes and oils. The ceremonies they perform with these objects include prayers, ritual sweepings and cleansings.

When *curanderos* heal on a spiritual level, they enter a trance. This type of healing is less common than the material level. *Curanderos* who work on this level are able to project their own souls or spirits out of their bodies, making the body a vessel for other spirits. This type of healing cleanses the body, removing any negative energies. Through this process, the mind and body are healed. It has been reported that depression, anxiety and even cancer respond dramatically to this type of healing. Many *curanderos* work in conjunction with mainstream medical care. They usually involve the whole family in the treatment process. They work from home and usually charge no fee and instead accept donations.

Mexican health beliefs strongly value foods, herbs and massage in healing. Mexican health beliefs are holistic in nature, constantly emphasizing the connection between the mind, body and spirit.



This 1974 etching by Carmen Lomas Garza, titled "Curandera," captures the cultural significance of folk healing traditions.

Picture taken from *Hispanic*, June 1998.

## Health Care Resources

**Migrant Clinicians Network**  
www.migrantclinicians.org

**National Center for Farmworker Health**  
www.ncfh.org

The **NC Farmworker Health Education Library** houses a collection of farmworker health education materials, which includes videos, patient education pamphlets and training tools.

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