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National Hispanic Medical Association Draws U.S. Doctors to San Antonio

Bicultural Forum in Texas Will Diagnose Strategies, Solutions to the Nation's Latino Health Crisis

SAN ANTONIO, TX (March 22) – San Antonio will be the epicenter of a national change in bicultural health care as Hispanic doctors from across the U.S. meet here March 23-25 to share innovative practices to treat diabetes, obesity, dementia and other diseases affecting Latinos.

The doctors are attending the 11th annual conference of the National Hispanic Medical Association (NHMA), a nonprofit group based in Washington, D.C., that represents Hispanic physicians in the U.S.

A press conference on bicultural health care will be held at 11 a.m. Friday, March 23, in Executive Salon Room 4 of the Crowne Plaza Hotel in San Antonio.

NHMA's conference – “Celebrando La Diversidad: Bicultural Health Care Is a National Priority” – will draw Hispanic doctors and health experts from across the U.S. to learn how bicultural health care increases wellness and decreases costs. Speakers include Dr. Garth N. Graham, deputy assistant secretary for the Office of Minority Health at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services; Dr. Francisco Cigarroa, president of the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio; and Dr. Fernando Guerra, director of the San Antonio Metropolitan Health District. In addition, Dr. Lucio Galileo Lastra Marín from Mexico's Secretaria de Salud will speak.

“The strategies learned at this conference will help all providers improve health care for all Americans so that we can finally eliminate health disparities,” Graham said.

NHMA is coming to San Antonio to help build a national bicultural health care policy to reach our growing Hispanic population, no matter where they live – Texas, Tennessee, Wisconsin, wherever, said Dr. Elena Rios, NHMA's president. “This is a forum to educate doctors, nurses and others on how cultural competence improves health care for Hispanic communities, which have the worst health care in this country. We have the power to change that by providing preventive care in a bicultural manner,” Rios said.

Also, NHMA will unveil an interactive Web portal – hispanichealth.info – chockfull of advice and expertise on bicultural health care. The portal is a resource in English and Spanish for health professionals and the public to bridge cultural and knowledge gaps. The portal is funded by the HHS Office of Minority Health, in collaboration with NHMA, the National Hispanic Health Professions Leadership Network and the NHMA

Council of Medical Societies. The portal focuses on bicultural care and diabetes and obesity, which affect Hispanics in greater proportions than non-Hispanic whites.

Doctors will explore such topics as chronic disease, breakthrough treatments, cultural issues and U.S.-Mexico border health. They also will learn about groundbreaking research and the latest developments on obesity, diabetes and dementia.

By 2050, 1.3 million older Hispanics will suffer from dementia, a progressive illness that increasingly puts more demands on patients' families. "Dementia affects the whole family," Rios said. "It's hard to see your parents not be able to take care of themselves." Dementia puts a strain on family caregivers, traditionally children and women.

Invited speakers on border health include Dr. Eduardo J. Sanchez, director of the Institute of Health Policy at the University of Texas School of Public Health, Austin, and Dr. Antonio Falcon, medical director of the Family Health Center in Rio Grande City, TX. They say the U.S.-Mexico Border Health Commission requires the combined commitment and focused efforts of health care, social services, educational, and environmental agencies and organizations and policymakers.

Also speaking is Salvador Balcorta, CEO of Centro de Salud Familiar La Fe, in El Paso, TX. Balcorta helped transform La Fe from a community health center into a comprehensive health and human services organization - and one that has received national praise. Latinos are the most uninsured population in the U.S., he says. "In the U.S., Texas, and TX border communities, 33%, 39% and 36% respectively, are uninsured," said Balcorta. "The impact is devastating." He is calling for comprehensive universal health coverage for all Americans.

Rios said a concern is that legal immigrants in low-income families have been barred from receiving Medicaid or State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) during their first five years in the U.S., straining family resources and keeping people from seeking treatment. "SCHIP is a wonderful program, but it covered only 6 million low-income children in 2005, and we need to reach 6 million more, plus provide reimbursement for translation services and other cultural competency care," Rios said.

San Antonio, the third-largest city in Texas - with a 58 percent Hispanic population, is a model for its understanding of issues particular to Latinos, such as language and cultural barriers and differences in treatments. San Antonio, which has one of the highest rates of diabetes in the U.S., is home to a nationally recognized school health program on diabetes and obesity prevention that other U.S. cities can copy, Rios said.

Also at the conference, NHMA will give a corporate award to Major League Baseball for their interest in partnering with NHMA on its childhood obesity campaign.

Established in 1994 in Washington, DC, NHMA is a nonprofit association that represents licensed Hispanic physicians in the U.S. in its mission to improve health care for Hispanics and the underserved. For more information, visit www.nhmamd.org.