



Dr. Karel Koenig (left) meeting with Tracy Edwards, her son Jair, and her 7 month old daughter, Zaira, who suffers from severe asthma

Diversity, Poverty & Management of Severe Asthma

The word ‘Asthma’ means “Laboured Breathing” in Greek, and was first used to describe the illness by Hippocrates. The famous Greek physician understood that true healing requires a thorough understanding of the patient and how that patient manages the disease, as well as the nature of the disease itself. Hippocrates wrote: “It is often more important to know what sort of person has a disease than to know what sort of disease a person has.”

YHSN’s Karel Koenig, working with colleagues from Yale and Howard Universities, is trying to understand severe persistent asthma as it occurs in infants and toddlers from low income African-American and Latino families. She is the lead investigator on a study titled “Diversity, Poverty & Management of Severe Asthma,” one of the four pilot studies being conducted within the Yale-Howard Partnership Center for Health Disparities. Dr. Koenig and her colleagues realize that understanding how these families incorporate asthma into their daily lives is essential to helping them manage the disease. They are look-

ing at how various influences shape the earliest family asthma management practices and how they converge in the everyday lives of these families. The findings will inform new approaches to asthma care that improve self-management, diminish disparities in morbidity, and prevent mortality in low income African-American and Latino children with chronic persistent asthma. “The ultimate goal,” said Dr. Koenig “is to develop interventions that target these very high risk families.”

In the United States, children under 4 years old experience the greatest rates of asthma. Moreover, disparities of disease incidence and severity occur due to poverty and ethnic identity. Children under 4 years old who live in poverty are hospitalized for asthma more often than any other age group, and being African American or Latino puts children at an even higher risk for severe disease.

Although many reasons for high morbidity in these children are known, how their families initially cope with, and go on to develop routine practices

for managing asthma, is poorly understood. According to Dr. Koenig, parents often recognize and manage symptoms long before professionals identify the disease or provide guidelines for management. Parents have also reported feeling that health care providers do not understand that they have important information to share about living with a child with asthma. “Many providers do not appreciate that family caregivers have vital information to contribute to the process of developing culturally sensitive interventions,” Dr. Koenig said.

Dr. Koenig explains that the Yale-Howard study is innovative in giving attention to how management evolves over time. “It is the first step in a program of research that will examine how understanding of asthma and asthma management practices develop as children grow and their familiarity with the illness increases,” she said.

Hippocrates wrote: “Healing is a matter of time, but it is sometimes also a matter of opportunity.” Dr. Koenig and her colleagues understand this well. “This project provides a unique opportunity to understand how low income, African American and Latino families with young children who have severe asthma cope with the illness and to develop self-management strategies that better meet their needs,” Dr. Koenig said. 🏰

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