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Sterilization Count Higher Than Expected

By CAROL GIACOMO

A federally funded survey of 153 Puerto Rican women in two poor Hartford neighborhoods has concluded that half have been sterilized. In some cases, women told interviewers they had signed consent forms authorizing the operation without fully understanding what they were told about it.

Officials of the Hispanic Health Council, which conducted the survey, said the incidence of sterilization in the two neighborhoods is much higher than expected by council officials and attributed it to several factors, including a lack of education among Puerto Ricans about birth control and the public health establishment's failure to make them more aware of alternatives to sterilization.

The rate of sterilization in Puerto Rico, where the government for years encouraged the operations as a means of population control, has long been 30 percent to 35 percent. Health council officials said they had expected their Hartford findings to be closer to this range.

The margin of error for the survey is 5 percent, meaning the finding that 53

percent sterilization among the women surveyed could be in error by 5 percent, either higher or lower.

The officials do not accuse medical professionals of coercing the women to be sterilized and concede that there are unanswered questions about how the surveyed women made their decisions to undergo the operations.

Still, Council Director Maria Gonzalez believes the survey percentages indicate that "too many Puerto Rican women have been sterilized."

The 153 women interviewed between February 1979 and January 1980 were randomly selected from about 2,350 women who are adult heads of households or co-heads of households in the Park Street/South Green and Charter Oak Terrace/Rice Heights neighborhoods. Their ages ranged from 17 to 65.

The data apparently constitute the first local statistics on sterilization within the predominantly low-income Puerto Rican community. Neither Hartford Hospital, which serves many Puerto Ricans, nor the city Health Department could provide comparable figures, although the hospital said it

performs more sterilization operations on white women than on blacks and Hispanics.

Council officials and an academic researcher consulted independently said the results are valid only for the two neighborhoods.

Of the 153 women surveyed, 79 had been sterilized, most by tubal ligation, a tying of the Fallopian tubes to prevent impregnation, council officials said.

After the initial survey, 26 of the women were questioned a second time in depth about sterilization. Eleven said they didn't fully understand what the operation meant.

Council officials said the women surveyed had been chosen randomly, half from one neighborhood and half from the other.

To obtain the sample, officials said, they first isolated blocks of housing units in both neighborhoods, where a high concentration of poor Puerto Ricans live.

Canvassers then went door to door and compiled lists of 600 to 800 Puerto Rican families. The families were assigned code numbers, and the survey sample was chosen using a standard

surveying practice of pairing code numbers with random numbers in a statistical table. The process assures random selection.

Bilingual researchers hired from the Puerto Rican community and specially trained for the project did the interviewing. The initial interviews lasted three hours each and were intended to glean information on 280 factors, including level of education, mental health and birth control.

Health council officials said the sterilization data were obtained by asking the women or, in a dozen cases, their husbands, what kind of birth control the family practiced. Fifty-three percent — the 79 — answered that the women had been sterilized. Many respondents used the phrase, "la operacion," the common Puerto Rican term for the tubal ligation operation, council officials said.

The council then did separate, more detailed one-hour interviews on sterilization with some of the women who said they had undergone surgery.

Thirty-one were chosen for these ad-

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ditional interviews, but five were dropped because their sterilizations had been performed in Puerto Rico and the council wanted to focus on conditions in Hartford.

Of the 26 women questioned in depth, 22 had been sterilized at Hartford Hospital, the primary hospital serving the two surveyed neighborhoods.

Sixteen had been sterilized before they were 30 years old. Twelve had two or three children before they were sterilized, nine had four to six children and five had seven to 10 children, the health council said.

Twelve signed consent forms authorizing the sterilizations when they were pregnant and three signed after giving birth or having an abortion, the council said.

The survey is part of a three-year research project on Puerto Rican health issues, which the council is conducting with funding from several sources, including the National Institute of Mental Health, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving and Aetna Life and Casualty Co. The council, founded nearly three years ago, is located at 99 Main St.

The sterilization data — the first of the survey results to be announced publicly — will be presented to a conference on Hispanic women at Fordham University Nov. 10.

Working with the council on the survey are two University of Connecticut faculty members, Pertti J. Peltó, professor of anthropology and community medicine and head of the medical anthropology program, and Stephen Schensul, head of the division of community health in the Department of Community Medicine.

The project is unique, the two professors said, because the research is being done by a community group, rather than by academics alone.

Ms. Gonzalez, who is a former chairwoman of the board of La Casa de Puerto Rico, a Hispanic advocacy agency, and a member of the Greater Hartford Process board of directors, said the researchers are not charging the hospital with violating laws or regulations. Most of the 26 sterilizations took place before 1978 when new, more stringent, federal rules on sterilization took effect.

Of the 26 women surveyed in depth, 13 spoke Spanish as their dominant language and had had interpreters present when they signed forms authorizing sterilization. Yet, seven told interviewers later that they had not really understood what was happening, health council officials said.

"Some didn't understand the type of operation they had. One didn't know she had a hysterectomy. Some didn't understand it was permanent," said Ms. Gonzalez.

Dr. Joseph Millerick, chief of obstetrics and gynecology at Hartford Hospital, said the hospital is committed to having women know exactly what they

are doing when they choose sterilization.

He suggested, however, that some of the women may be choosing sterilization because they don't want more children and later claiming ignorance when their husbands want larger families.

"That disturbs me because we come out the bad guys," he said.

Health council officials cited different reasons. They said a major problem is that many poor Puerto Ricans are conditioned to believe that sterilization is the only effective and trouble-free method of birth control.

This view derives in part from life on the island where, for years, the commonwealth government promoted cheap and easily available sterilization as a means of controlling population growth.

Council officials also faulted the health-care establishment — the hospitals, the area health systems agency, the city health department and family planning agencies — for failing to serve the poor adequately.

Sixteen of the 26 women surveyed had tried the pill or an intrauterine device but experienced difficulties such as bleeding or infection and eventually chose sterilization, health council officials said.

"None of the women seemed to have the backup that would allow them to go back to the clinic, for instance, and have their pill changed" instead of being sterilized, said Peter Guarnaccia, a UConn graduate student assisting with the project.

"There is a need for a comprehensive health care system that is bilingual and bicultural" and is able to serve people throughout their lives, he said. "By the time most of these women got into the health system, all other options (on birth control) were precluded."

Health council officials said they hoped to use the new data, not only to prod the health establishment to provide better service to the poor, but also to educate the Puerto Rican community about key health issues, such as sterilization.

They said their survey interviews suggest sterilization has a long-term adverse impact on the Puerto Rican family and all the effects — such as broken homes — are not known. Analysis of the data is continuing.

Meaningful local statistics with which to compare the new health council data could not be found.

Hartford Hospital was unable to provide a statistical breakdown of the number of black, white and Hispanic women sterilized. However, Millerick said that more white women than blacks and Hispanics undergo the surgery, reflecting the larger number of whites in the hospital's client population.

Increasingly, as the Hispanic population has grown into the United States' largest minority group, demographers have established a separate classifica-

tion — Hispanic — to identify members of Spanish-speaking ethnic groups. Previously, Hispanics had been classified variously as black, white and sometimes "other," depending on their skin color and who was doing the classifying.

The hospital did release figures showing that over the last five years, the number of tubal ligations performed at the hospital has decreased from 825 annually to fewer than 400, bucking a national trend. Tubal ligation is the most common sterilization procedure for women.

A 1976 poll of 8,611 women nationwide by the federal government's National Center for Health Statistics found the sterilization rate for all U.S. women to be 19 percent. Overall, it found the sterilization rate among white women to be 18 percent; black

women, 20 percent, and Hispanic women, 14 percent.

Rosalind Petchesky, who has a doctorate in political science and is researching women's contraceptive issues as a Rockefeller fellow at Columbia University, said the federal data are flawed because they either under-represented Hispanic women in the sample or classified them as black or white instead of Hispanic.

In addition, she said that close examination of the 1976 national survey figures shows that low-income women in general — not just blacks or Puerto Ricans — are most likely to undergo sterilization.

For instance, she said, the national figures showed that poor white women living in the United States and ranging in age from 25 to 34 have a sterilization rate of 37 percent.