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## Increasingly diverse community relies on bilingual health care

By ROEL GARCIA

PHOTO: Dr. Margo Duncan, left, and Jessie Grijalba look at Spanish health pamphlets at the Holland Community Health Center Jan. 30. Sentinel/Dan Irving

Dr. Margo Duncan learned to speak Spanish on the job while working with patients who spoke little or no English.

Duncan, a doctor at the Holland Community Health Center, gets plenty of opportunities to use her skills: More than 900 patients at the health center list Spanish as their primary language.

When Duncan goes through a patient's fact sheet and doesn't know the patient, she asks if they prefer English or Spanish.

"When they say 'Spanish,' you see a look of relief on their face," said Duncan, who's been at the health center for five years.

"I tell them my Spanish isn't very good, but they don't care. They don't have to work past a language barrier and have to try to explain their symptoms."

As the Holland area's population grows and diversifies, so does the demand for medical attention.

Hospitals and clinics provide services and information to keep up with the area's diversification by providing translators for patients, doctors who speak Spanish and medical information in Spanish.

In 2006, the clinic saw 2,955 patients, with roughly three out of every 10 patients being Latino, the largest ethnic bloc at the center.

In addition to Duncan, the health center employs five bilingual staff members and a bilingual physician's assistant will be hired this spring who will help with the Spanish-speaking patients.

The health center, 336 S. River Ave., opened in 1995. It has a bilingual receptionist at the front desk to answers questions or phone calls from Spanish-speaking patients, practice manger Theresa Westerlund said.

"We have forms and pamphlets in English and Spanish that make it easy for patients to understand when they come here," Westerlund said. "There is a comfort level here. Patients know they can be understood."

On the same track is Zeeland Community Hospital, which also provides information to patients in various languages.

"We offer patient information and discharge instructions in multiple languages and are able to access patient information and discharge instructions online for languages that are not spoken frequently," said hospital spokeswoman Melissa Kamara Liggins.

The health center also treats minority patients other than Latinos.

When patients speaking other languages come to the health center, Westerlund said the health center staff contacts Holland Hospital for help with translators.

Holland Hospital partners with the health center. One of the many services the two partner for is interpretation.

"If we get someone of Asian descent or of Middle Eastern descent, we call up the hospital to help us out," Westerlund said.

Holland Hospital spokesman Tim Breed described the process.

"All they have to do is call us and we send someone out there who's been through the proper training and who understands the medical terminology and someone who can interpret for the patient," Breed said.

As the community diversifies, the need for interpreters grows, Breed said.

Kamara Liggins pointed out that Zeeland Community Hospital can usually contact an interpreter in 25 seconds and have interpreters that are trained in 180 languages and dialects, with the most common translation requests for Spanish, Vietnamese and Laotian.

Westerlund said it's important for the health center's staff to be prepared to help the community.

"All of the people coming into our community will need medical care at some time," she said.

Duncan, meanwhile, has learned enough Spanish that she can communicate with the patients and even share humor.

"This is when it's become fun, now that I can joke with them," she said.

### **By the numbers**

The Holland Community Health Center saw 2,955 patients in 2006. Here is the patient breakdown by ethnicity for 2006 at the health center:

- \* Asian: 61 (2.06 percent)
  - \* Black: 177 (5.99 percent)
  - \* American Indian: 6 (0.20 percent)
  - \* White: 755 (25.55 percent)
  - \* Hispanic: 846 (28.63 percent)
  - \* Unreported: 1,110 (37.56 percent)
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