

Seeking to Make a Broader Impact on Health of Latino Children, Pediatrician Adds an M.P.H.

AS A UCLA MEDICAL STUDENT, **ALMA GUERRERO** concluded that to effectively address her goal of improving health in Latino communities, an M.D. wouldn't be enough. "I realized that we are trained as physicians to focus on individual care, but it was important to me to do something more," says Guerrero, a pediatrician who is about to complete her M.P.H. studies at the School of Public Health. "So I decided that after my residency training I would get my M.P.H. to help me better understand the factors affecting the health of a community and how to plan, implement, and evaluate programs to improve it."

Guerrero is interested in promoting health among young Latino children through a better understanding of the role of parental perceptions and cultural barriers. Under the mentorship of two of her medical school faculty members, Drs. Alice Kuo and Wendy Slusser (the latter also a member of the School of Public Health faculty), she became involved in a focus-group study at the Venice Family Clinic seeking to understand parental perceptions of young children's weight. "We found that these mothers do consider physicians to be important resources for understanding issues related to their children's weight – and that they are fairly knowledgeable on strategies to prevent overweight or manage an overweight child," Guerrero says.

When it comes to diet, her research group concluded, the problem is not that these mothers don't understand what should be done, but that their efforts to change their child's dietary habits are often undermined by other family members, such as the father and grandparents. Guerrero believes this problem might be addressed with a more family-centered approach to the issue of overweight and obesity among Latino children – bringing other family members in for at least one visit, for example. Her study also found that more emphasis needs to be placed on the importance of physical activity for this population.

After completing her degree, Guerrero plans to stay at UCLA as a junior faculty member in the medical school's Department of Pediatrics, focusing on child health policy. In particular, her goal is to promote health in Latino communities by continuing to learn more about the role of family in early childhood development and implementing community-based interventions to apply that knowledge toward better health outcomes. Guerrero recently put this concept into practice through a School of Public Health partnership with several local Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) programs. She developed a "train-the-trainer" module for WIC staff to help parents better understand how their child develops and how to have more meaningful encounters with their child's doctor around health and development.

She is confident that the M.P.H. program has prepared her well for such a career. "The knowledge and tools I have gained through this program have been invaluable," Guerrero says. "I now have the skills that will enable me to implement and evaluate programs focusing on early childhood and Latino parents. Above all, I have a much better appreciation for the importance of the life-course approach – understanding the social determinants of health and how early factors have an impact on young children for the rest of their lives."



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— Dr. Alma Guerrero