

A summer in public health research

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With an interest in government and a desire to investigate and minimize the effects of environmental toxins on public health, I spent my summer Wisconsin Medical Society Foundation fellowship with the Wisconsin Division of Public Health (DPH) researching residential pesticide use.

Wishing to secure a few glorious weeks off at the end of the summer before an arduous second year of medical school, I began my summer experience the Monday after finals. My mentor and Chief Medical Officer in Family and Community Health, Murray Katcher, MD, greeted me, and after a short tour of the office and a brief talk about my summer plans, the barrage of faces began. I was surprised by the number of people involved with the health of Wisconsin's population, and I was just seeing the tip of the iceberg.

Soon the work began, and I quickly discovered that what seemed simple—designing a pamphlet to be used to educate mothers about pesticide safety and safer pest control methods and testing its educational value—was not. Nuances and complications developed in the project's first phase that resulted in numerous reformulations of the pamphlet content, the study design, and the crite-

ria for involving human subjects. For several weeks leading up to the WIC (Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children) visits during which I distributed the pamphlet, the entire project's fate seemed to hinge on ironing out one more kink within a day's time to stay on course.

The project's second phase consisted of interviewing moms at WIC clinics, giving them the pamphlet, and calling them back a few weeks later to see if their knowledge level improved. The visits were valuable not only to the study, but also because they allowed me to observe public health outreach in the community. Often I used time between interviews to talk to the staff about the WIC program and its services.

The families at the Janesville and Beloit clinics were diverse, interesting people who appreciated the services they received. Although some mothers whom I interviewed were understandably fatigued from taking care of their children, the vast majority seemed grateful for my time when it should have been the other way around. Upon calling participants back to determine what information they had retained, almost every one thanked me again. A few women who had moved between interviews and no longer had their own phone numbers scheduled a time when I could call a friend's house to ask them follow-up questions.

I was impressed by the number of participants who retained the information in the pamphlet. Many

distrusted pesticides already, but were using them unintentionally because they were not aware that pesticides are found in many familiar household products.

During the project's third phase. I compiled data, analyzed results, and submitted a manuscript, with help from Doctor Katcher and Marlon Mundt, a University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine statistician. The formal research process was more difficult than I had anticipated and gave me a greater appreciation for the studies that lead to policy changes.

Because of the unanticipated labor in finishing the project, those few glorious weeks of vacation at the end of summer became a little less glorious. However, the work I did on a project as simple as assembling and testing a pamphlet enabled me to grasp the intricacy, magnitude, and importance of the tasks set before public health workers.

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