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State Gets D In Health Disparity

But Report Gives Wis. As Whole A B-

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Anita Weier The Capital Times

Racial and ethnic minorities, rural and Milwaukee County residents, and people with low education levels are much less healthy than other Wisconsin residents, according to the Population Health Institute at UW-Madison.

While Wisconsin as a whole rated a B- for residents' overall health in a related national study and consistently ranks relatively high compared to other states, its grade for health disparity was a D.

The disparity report evaluated overall health, not access to or quality of health care. Health was determined by using mortality rates over three years and surveys of the number of unhealthy days in the past month - measures of length of life and quality of life.

"In every age group that we examined, the differences in health between sub-groups, defined by race or education, are very large," said Dr. Pat Remington, director of the institute and one of the study's authors. "In fact, the differences within Wisconsin are greater than the differences between the very best and very worst states."

Wisconsin has failed to reduce mortality among working-age adults who have a high school diploma or less, are African-American or are American Indian, the report said.

The state also is failing in its efforts to improve health-related quality of life for African-American and Hispanic or Latino working-age adults, according to the report.

Milwaukee County does especially poorly in the health scores because large portions of its population have low education or are racial minorities, factors that are linked to higher mortality rates, Remington said.

Women fared better than men regarding mortality but suffered more unhealthy days.

Each major age group was analyzed by gender, geography, education and ethnicity.

The institute, an arm of the UW School of Medicine and Public Health, plans to issue recommendations in 2008 on ways to reduce the disparities.

"Good health is the result of many factors, only one of which is good

health care," Remington explained. "Other factors, such as diet and exercise, cigarette smoking, and income and education, are important contributors to the health of individuals and the population as a whole."

David Kindig, a senior advisor to the Population Health Institute, conceded that the report's results were not unexpected. However, he said, "People marginalize the minority effect, but the educational effect is really mainstream."

Education also correlates well with socio-economic status, he added.

Kindig termed the report a call for action regarding health literacy, physical environment, education and insurance coverage.

"This is a score card, not a road map for improvement, but it does show the groups that should be targeted," he said.

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