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Report: State gets a B- in health

By DAVID WAHLBERG / Lee Newspapers

Wisconsin gets a B- in health but a D in health disparities in a new report that highlights problems such as infant mortality among blacks in Milwaukee.

"Wisconsin is doing well overall in health, but there are unacceptable" gaps among racial, geographic, gender and educational groups, said Dr. Pat Remington, director of the UW Population Health Institute.

"Wisconsin can do a better job of making sure all groups share in health," Remington said.

The report was funded by the Wisconsin Partnership Program, a \$300 million fund at the UW School of Medicine and Public Health created after the nonprofit Blue Cross and Blue Shield became a for-profit company.

A follow-up report next year will offer recommendations to improve Wisconsin's health, said Dr. David Kindig, an author of the new report.

Researchers based the grades on mortality rates and surveys in which people said how many days in the past month they were physically or mentally ill. To determine the grades for health disparities, data among various groups were compared.

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A different approach led to Wisconsin's No. 1 ranking among states last month by the federal Agency for Health Research and Quality. That was based on the quality of care hospitals provide. A similar report by the Commonwealth Fund ranked Wisconsin's health-care system ninth.

Another recent ranking, by the United Health Foundation, put Wisconsin 10th in health status.

In the new report, in which Wisconsin scored a B- in health, 16 states fared better. They include Iowa and Minnesota, which received Bs. No state got an A.

Twenty states did better than Wisconsin's D grade in health disparities. They include Iowa, which got a B, and Minnesota, which got a B-.

A major disparity in Wisconsin is infant mortality. Among blacks, 17.6 out of 1,000 babies die before their first birthday. That is more than three times the rate for whites, which is 5.1 per 1,000 babies.

Death rates remain high for blacks in childhood and later in life; the rates are also high for American Indians and Latinos.

Geographically, Milwaukee fared worst in health, with rural areas scoring better and smaller cities and suburbs ranking the best. Men died at higher rates than women in all age groups.

Remington said one factor examined -- educational status -- can be influenced. The infant mortality rate is lowest among people with college degrees, regardless of their race.

"You can invest in education," Remington said.

David Wahlberg is reporter for the Wisconsin State Journal in Madison.

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