

Cabbies Get Tested for TB with Drive-by Readings

Public health workers have long known that immigrants who barely get by have little access to healthcare and are at high risk for such infectious diseases as tuberculosis. How do you improve their healthcare? Well, perhaps you start by bringing the healthcare team to the patient.

In a recent study, School of Medicine researchers did just that. They boosted TB testing among taxicab drivers, many of whom are immigrants, by administering the skin tests to drivers at Kennedy International Airport. Their study, which was published earlier this year in the *American Journal of Public Health*, proved that understanding immigrants' needs and tailoring services to fit their schedules can improve testing in at-risk groups.

The researchers, led by Francesca Gany, M.D., Assistant Professor of Medicine and Director of the Center for Immigrant Health, chose the airport as the site for their study because cabbies congregate there, often waiting hours to pick up passengers. The results of the skin tests were read outside Bellevue Hospital, where the cabbies drove through a fire lane with their arms held out of their car windows. The researchers inspected their arms right there; the drivers never got out of their taxis.

"If the drivers' tests were negative, it took them two minutes, and they were really satisfied that it worked very smoothly," says Dr. Gany.

TB is one of the world's greatest killers, taking the lives of 2 million people each year. The World Health Organization reports that some 8 million new

cases of TB arise each year, and that currently more than one-third of the world's population is infected with the bacterium that causes TB. The microbe can lie dormant for decades and then suddenly activate and attack the lungs (producing a bloody cough), spinal cord, kidney, and other parts of the body.

"We always have to be vigilant about TB, because with global travel, what's halfway across the world can be here very easily," says Dr. Gany.

At the airport, Dr. Gany and her colleagues from the Center for the Study of Asian American Health, gave the TB test to 123 drivers from more than 25 countries. Most had no health insurance. Of the 78 drivers who drove to

Bellevue for the follow-up readings, 48 had a positive result. Thirty-one of the cabbies with positive results received chest X-rays. Nine were subsequently advised to start treatment for latent TB infection, but only four completed their treatment.

Dr. Gany hopes to use the taxi study as a model for improving access to healthcare in medically underserved communities. Already plans are under way to set up areas outside several public clinics so that drivers can park there and dash in for appointments, explains Dr. Gany. In the future, she hopes to work with the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene to set up mobile health clinics. ■

— Fenella Saunders



At Bellevue, NYU outreach workers stand by cabbies participating in a TB study.