PUERTO RICO GOES ‘ALL-IN’ ON DIABETES EDUCATION
Newly Empowered Patients Ask for Glucometers and Get an Overwhelming ‘Yes’

The ability of people with diabetes to monitor their blood sugar levels is critical to their health in order to prevent the debilitating consequences of diabetes such as blindness and amputations. Yet, some people with diabetes have no knowledge of such monitoring or how to acquire testing equipment or use it, and some cannot even afford its minimal cost.

This was the case among some populations in Puerto Rico, until recently.

As a result of diabetes self-management education (DSME) classes and the overwhelming support of the medical community, government health agencies and the private sector, access to basic tools for self-management is more accessible, while lack of knowledge about diabetes is being gradually eliminated.

“Puerto Rico is evolving as possibly our greatest success story in diabetes education,” said Brenda Ortiz, project director for the TMF Quality Innovation Network Quality Improvement Organization (QIN-QIO), under contract with the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), which oversees a region including Arkansas, Missouri, Oklahoma, Puerto Rico and Texas. The QIN-QIO provides DSME classes in Puerto Rico through its partner Quality Improvement Professional Research Organization, Inc. (QIPRO).

“A great example of the enthusiasm of the community is its response to the patients needing glucose monitoring devices,” she said. “DSME classes are about the empowerment that knowledge creates. Many patients learned for the first time about glucometers and the importance of monitoring one’s blood sugar levels.”

Ms. Ortiz said that the patients learned how to work with their physicians to obtain glucometer coverage under Medicare and insurance programs. And, for those patients without any coverage and too poor to afford the devices, Walgreens pharmacies provided free glucometers. A senior center, Centro Diamantino, also provided extra testing strips beyond the 30-day supplies. The senior center is funded by the Puerto Rico Agency on Aging and the City of Carolina.

“Glucose monitors are essential for a patient to learn how to self-manage their diabetes and understand the impact of their daily choices and activities on their blood glucose,” Ms. Ortiz said. “We are very pleased that the educators, patients and physicians worked closely with the Medicare Advantage plans to obtain glucose monitors for our workshop participants. And we are also grateful for the generosity of Walgreens pharmacies. Such a simple tool as a glucometer can make a huge difference in a patient’s life.”
According to the Puerto Rico Department of Health, diabetes is the island’s third leading cause of death. One of every six adults there has diabetes, with prevalence higher for those 65 years of age and older as well as for those with less education and living in poverty.

Although diabetes education is the critical first step for patients, it is meaningless if not followed with the required lifestyle changes patients must make.

Victor Colón Rodríguez has had diabetes for 17 years. He said the DSME classes taught him to eat right, resulting in a loss of 24 pounds and having more energy.

“I learned to eat better and to keep my doctor visits,” Mr. Colón said. “I don’t get tired as I did before and my legs don’t get swollen.

Aurora Bonilla David has Type 2 diabetes and said that before the DSME classes “my (blood) sugar was high all the time. Thanks to the classes, my blood sugar level is under control.”

She said she also learned the importance of taking her medicines at the right time.

Dionisio Cardona Zayas loves to eat candy, but because of his diabetes it leaves him “a little bit weak.” Since taking the DSME classes, he monitors his blood sugar levels and keeps them normal. He has also modified his candy intake.

“I learned the importance of decreasing the processed sugar and to drink a lot of water to help the kidneys,” he said.

Puerto Rico’s support for people with diabetes goes beyond making glucometers available to diabetes patients. The island’s government agencies as well as its First Lady, Wilma Pastrana Jiménez, have promoted diabetes education and healthier living.

As First Lady, Ms. Pastrana has initiated several health and nutrition campaigns and was the island’s spokesperson for Diabetes Awareness Month in 2015. Her diabetes campaign slogan was “Act today, savor tomorrow. Preventing and controlling diabetes is on your plate.”

This effort included a government interagency awareness campaign for diabetes education. The initiative involved the Department of Education, Department of Agriculture, Patient Advocacy Office, Elderly Advocacy Office, Health and Nutrition Commission, Secretariat for Family Health and Integrated Services, Secretariat for Planning and Development, Pan American Health Organization – Puerto Rico Office, Pediatric Obesity Prevention Alliance as well as professional, academic, not-for-profit and private agencies.

The First Lady has also called the citizenry to action, emphasizing the importance of nutrition and health education. Under an umbrella initiative called Proyectos de Vida (Life Projects), she is promoting healthy lifestyles. Activa tu Vida (Activate Your Life) promotes exercise to prevent obesity; Siembra Vida (Sowing Life) is a home gardening project promoting healthy eating, food security and love of the land.
In addition, the Puerto Rico Department of Health schedules nutritionists to visit supermarkets where they lead tours of shoppers through the food aisles and discuss healthy food options and how to read food labels. The tours are promoted through poster campaigns in the supermarkets and on the Department of Health’s website.

“This is a very comprehensive effort to educate people with diabetes, thereby reducing the tragic human consequences and financial costs of the disease,” Ms. Ortiz said.

About TMF

TMF Health Quality Institute focuses on improving lives by improving the quality of health care through contracts with federal, state and local governments, as well as private organizations. For 40 years, TMF has helped health care providers and practitioners in a variety of settings improve care for their patients.