

Cancer Education, Prevention and Early Detection in Indigenous Population in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, Mexico: The Cancer Prevention and Research Center (CEPREC) Project

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The Centro de Estudios y Prevencion del Cancer (CEPREC, Cancer Prevention and Research Center) is a non-profit organization founded in 2001 with the aim to help educate individuals and rural communities to reduce the incidence of cancer and lower the death rate. Cancer is the second leading cause of mortality in Mexico; 80–90% of patients are diagnosed as having advanced disease. The Mexican healthcare system, however, has focused all of its efforts on cancer therapy rather than on cancer education, prevention, and early detection. Obviously, cancer therapy is not impacting the outcome. Moreover, in our country, the 5 major cancer centers, which are located in the largest cities, are insufficient for the thousands of patients diagnosed each year. Cancer therapy is too expensive and is only available to those patients who have health insurance support, either from the public healthcare system (Mexican Institute of Social Security and or Ministry of Health) or private companies, which is a minority of patients. Therefore, we believe that investment in cancer education, prevention and early detection would be less costly than paying for expensive and unsuccessful therapies. CEPREC's main goals are focused on these issues.

Since August 2001 we have begun our activities in the State of Oaxaca, which is a poor, ethnically diverse state in southern Mexico. The majority of the population is indigenous, and its income is the lowest in the country. Of Oaxaca's 2.5 million people, about 900,000, speak one (or more) of 15 indigenous languages; the Zapotec language is second to Spanish in the number of speakers. This makes it the most culturally and linguistically diverse state in Mexico. The incidence of cervical and breast cancer and other neoplasias is higher in indigenous population than in people living in other states. The Isthmus of Tehuantepec is one of the seven regions in Oaxaca. The Isthmus region encompasses the districts of Juchitan and Tehuantepec where Zapotecs, Huaves, Mixes, Chontales and Zoques live. More than 500,000 Zapotecs live in 375 named localities, which are grouped into 41 municipalities. CEPREC has designed educational, preventive and early-detection programs in that population with the aim of increasing awareness of and knowledge

about cervical, breast, lung, prostate, stomach, and colon and rectum carcinomas, the most common neoplasias in that region. In fulfilling these objectives, CEPREC is working in collaboration with volunteers and organized women's groups. A network of community promoters is being organized. Annual cancer-oriented medical check-ups and screening tests are being offered to the population at very little cost. Playing a key role are the screening tests: the Pap smear, colposcopy, breast self-examination, mammography, bronchoscopy, gastrointestinal endoscopy, testicular and ovarian ultrasound and prostate examination. Recently, human papilloma virus testing by using the hybrid capture technique has been in the evaluation process in combination with Pap smear and colposcopy. A regional cancer registry also is being developed.

With the aim of extending our programs in the southern part of the country, we have established an alliance with the Centro Veracruzano de Prevención del Cáncer en la Mujer 'Rigoberta Menchu' (CEVEPRECAM), a non-profit organization based in the state of Veracruz. CEPREC also organizes continuing professional education programs for physicians and nurses. 'Science For Everyone', a scientific educational program organized by our center, promotes science education among high-school students. The National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), the main university in the nation, through the Facultad de Estudios Superiores 'Zaragoza', its health sciences campus, has designated CEPREC as a UNAM-affiliated center. Recently, Jose Murat, Governor of the State of Oaxaca, stated his support for our project. A nationwide and international fundraising campaign that will provide partial funding for our programs and infrastructure for early cancer diagnosis, treatment and research for the population of southern Mexico is under way. We have also invited top oncologists to collaborate in our Scientific Advisory Board and participate in our center's first 'CEPREC International Cancer Conference', a UNAM-sponsored scientific meeting, which was held in Huatulco, Oaxaca, Mexico from March 4–6, 2004.