

IDRC FEATURE

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TEACHERS SCHOOLED IN HEALTH

by SUSANA AMAYA

Porfiria de Martinez tells of the time a small boy called her to come and care for his mother, who insisted that she had only been pricked by a thorn and would recover without going to the health post. Porfiria suspected that the woman was suffering from snakebite, however, because although there was no visible wound, the woman presented obvious symptoms. Against her patient's will she had her taken to the health post where, two days later health officials confirmed her diagnosis. The patient had arrived in time for treatment. Had her arrival been delayed a little longer, she could not have been saved.

Porfiria is proud of her work, which involves caring on a day-to-day basis for the health of people who consult her. But Porfiria is not a traditional healer, nurse, or physician. She is the third grade teacher at Primary School 303 Alfonso Loma, seven kilometres from Caragatatay, in the centre of Paraguay.

Every day Porfiria teaches two different sessions — girls in the morning and boys in the afternoon. In her free time, she cares for those who come to consult her, and on weekends she visits the families assigned to her. Francisco Gamarra, principal of this primary school, and his wife, Eudelia, the sixth grade teacher, also work as health promoters. And there are 100 other rural teachers in Paraguay working with them in this year-old program, officially called the Rural Teachers Health Services Extension.

The program grew from the fortunate meeting of two physicians, Ruben Mallorquin, Director of the First Sanitary Region of the Ministry of Health, and Anibal Rolon, Professor of Pathology at the National University of Paraguay. Both were concerned about the gap that existed between the university and national reality, particularly in the rural areas. Health coverage, through the Ministry of Health's system of hospitals, health centres and posts, reached about 55 percent of the population.

Dr Rolon thought that rural teachers, who are in contact with the population and serve in a large number of schools, even in remote areas, could become effective health promoters because they are well trained, are community leaders, and have the ability and willingness to serve. With assistance from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), of Canada, a project to test this belief began in 1977 in Pucu Island and Caraguatay, Department of Cordillera, which belongs to the First Sanitary Region.

As a first step, the Ministry of Health mapped the area, locating and numbering each rural dwelling. A survey conducted among teachers to determine if they were interested in the program and how much time they could devote to it showed a high degree of interest.

"We thought that it would be the first program of its kind in the world", says Dr Rolon. "Then we found out about the program in India... So we were the second to do it."

A special feature of both the Indian and Paraguayan programs is their use of teachers as volunteers. The program's designers had considered the teachers because of their special influence in the rural regions, their large numbers as a result of a well-developed primary school program even in the most remote areas, and their high level of training. The health system, on the other hand, is not well known in rural areas, provides limited services, and is underutilized. Dr Mallorquin affirms that for him the best feature of the project is that the teachers will act as extensions of the local health posts.

The participating teachers were given a two-week training course during the summer vacation that focussed on the delivery of educational, curative, and preventive services in such areas as maternal and child health, nutrition, first aid, sanitation, etc. Working in groups of 15 to 20, the teachers received essential theoretical and practical training. They also came into contact with the hospital environment and with those people with whom they would later work.

Teachers were then given individual assignments. Each is responsible for some 50 families living in his or her school area or neighbourhood. Thus, some 25 000 people are covered. The teachers' first contact with their families involved a demographic-health survey which familiarized them with their assigned families, their living and sanitary conditions. This information, as well as information gathered during weekly visits, is gathered, pre-classified by the project supervisor, and sorted for project monitoring and evaluation. It also provides the project's directors with a picture of local problems, weak points, and areas that the teachers have not understood well.

Great demands are made of the teachers' time. Their weekdays are spent in school, so they must devote their weekends to house-to-house visits of families and patients. Some families live in such remote areas that the only way they can be reached is on foot, by horse, or by horsedrawn cart. The teachers' families also participate, as spouses often accompany the teachers *cum* health promoters on their visits, or, as in the case of the Gamarra family in Alfonso Loma School, both participate in the project. Says Eudelia de Gamarra: "Thanks to the health work that the teachers have been doing, we have seen many changes in environmental health, and in maternal and child health. It's a lot of work for us, but we're willing to do it and we're making a contribution to the country at the same time."

One effect of the project has been to create an unexpected demand for latrines. The district health inspector explains that his installation allotment of 50 latrines a year ran out during the first few months. "More latrines are installed in one month now than were previously installed in six or seven months", he says. Sometimes the demand for the prefabricated squatting plates is greater than the supply that is stored and sold in the school.

The project has also had beneficial effects on vaccination campaigns. Without the teachers' assistance, these campaigns are difficult to launch, costly, and require door-to-door promotion. Now, the children bring home the information, and a large number of parents attend with preschool children.

According to Victoria Mareco, education supervisor for the project, "the school has become the centre of the community through this program." One reason is that the teachers are in direct and constant contact with their families through the children who are the best messengers. But she explains, the main reason is the deep-rooted conviction in the community that "the teacher is always right".

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