

Outreach Workers Advance Research Efforts

by Deborah Vetter

Rickie Foster has earned the respect and trust of his co-workers, neighbors, and family. Perhaps surprisingly, Rickie is also accepted and trusted in another community—the community of a drug user.

Through his experiences growing up in the inner city, Rickie has learned the social networks of the drug-using community. Knowledge of these networks makes him a valuable resource for researchers in the Wright State University School of Medicine's Substance Abuse Intervention Program (SAIP), which works closely with people like Rickie to achieve specific research objectives.

The SAIP research team, under the direction of Harvey Siegal, Ph.D., professor of community health and of sociology, brings together experts to investigate these and other social and public health problems. For the past eight years, Robert Carlson, Ph.D., associate professor of community health and

a medical anthropologist and ethnographer, has teamed up with outreach workers like Rickie to meet and talk to drug users. Russel Falck, M.A., assistant professor and project director, and Jichuan Wang, Ph.D., associate professor and statistician, develop surveys and conduct appropriate statistical analyses from the responses.

Success in applying the principles of ethnography and medical anthropology are directly related to mutual respect and trust between the researcher and the research participant. "Outreach workers play a pivotal, crucial role in our projects," explains Dr. Carlson. "They identify potential participants and help us gain their trust."

Ethnographers conclude that there are patterns to the way drug users behave, create meaning in their lives, and perceive their place in society. To really know an alternative way of living, a re-

searcher must "step into" that system and "live the life" to the extent that is ethically and legally possible. "The medical anthropologist," explains Dr. Carlson, "steps into other people's worlds with a nonjudgmental ear." Ethnographers are also skilled at translating relationship patterns evident in one environment in terms that make sense in another. Through these translations, "We give members of this community a voice," says Dr. Carlson.

Ethnographers and medical anthropologists build on qualitative research methods that are continually being refined by field researchers like Dr. Carlson. The purpose of the most recent research study is to understand the natural course of crack cocaine use in Dayton. "We go to crack houses to talk to people and we conduct in-depth interviews in our offices," Dr. Carlson says. Specifically, SAIP's research team is interested in the way an individual's drug use changes over time, the kinds of health problems a drug user faces, and the barriers for drug users in receiving health services.

Initially, the researchers observe and record what is said and done. Later, they will use the information collected through the interview process to design survey questions that are sensitive to local and cultural practices. Surveys developed from qualitative research methods become tools for measuring (quantifying) the results of the



Dr. Robert Carlson and outreach worker Rickie Foster.

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study. Before drawing conclusions, the research team often turns to outreach workers to corroborate the accuracy of the drug users’ responses.

Insight into the culture of drug users gained from SAIP’s research projects is invaluable in developing prevention, intervention, and medical treatment programs. Ethnographic research findings can be used to support or refute the appropriateness of public health policy. One SAIP study helped transform the public health perspective that users wanted to share their needles. Findings that refuted that perspective were published in a 1996 award-winning

journal article, “The Political Economy of AIDS among Drug Users in the United States: Beyond Blaming the Victim or Powerful Others,” published in *American Anthropologist*.

Dr. Carlson envisions researchers—specifically, ethnographers who are conducting AIDS prevention research—as advocates for this section of society. “Drug users have been stigmatized in our society,” emphasizes Dr. Carlson. As a “marginalized segment of society” drug users are “isolated, often disadvantaged, and without necessary resources. We’re working with the forgotten members of the community.”



Above: Robert Carlson, Ph.D., associate professor of community health, medical anthropologist and ethnographer.

Below: Dr. Carlson (far left) with outreach workers Don Quee, Sherry Osborne, Connie Tidwell, and Rickie Foster.

