



State of Wisconsin  
**Department of Health and Family Services**

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Jim Doyle, Governor  
Karen Timberlake, Secretary

## **April is Minority Health Month**

By Dr. Sheri Johnson

Minority Health Month is a time to reflect on our understanding of what it means to be healthy, and what it takes to be healthy. The good news is that Wisconsin has one of the nation's lowest rates of people without health insurance, and we rank very highly in the quality of health care that our residents receive.

However, the health status of the major racial and ethnic groups in our state is substantially worse than for the majority white population. For instance, Wisconsin has one of the nation's lowest infant mortality rates for white babies, but it has the highest mortality rate for African American babies. In Wisconsin, an infant born to an African American woman is three times more likely to die during the first year of life than an infant born to a white woman. Infant death rates are also higher for Laotian, Hmong and American Indian populations.

This disturbing finding is a critical indicator of the overall health of our state. Infant mortality rates tell us how well we are doing as a society. They reflect factors such as social support and cohesion, poverty, and access to healthy food choices. Infant mortality rates dramatically illustrate that good health is more than the absence of disease. It requires more than health insurance or access to health care.

There is no single factor that leads to health disparities. Contributing factors include educational and employment opportunities, safe and affordable housing, quality early child care, and access to good health care. These are issues for all of us involved in public health.

The challenge is daunting, because we must work across all aspects of society to achieve greater equity of health status for all of our residents. For example, the quality of health care depends heavily on the cultural competency of caregivers and language barriers between patient and caregiver. These issues affect not only a person's willingness to seek care, but also the quality and comprehensiveness of care received.

To learn more, we encourage you to watch the ongoing PBS series, "Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?" It's a four-part documentary that probes the reasons behind health disparities, and its timing couldn't be more relevant. It portrays with stunning clarity how many diverse factors combine to create health disparities.

Also, if you want more Wisconsin data, please visit the website of the Division of Public Health's Minority Health Program at <http://dhfs.wisconsin.gov/health/MinorityHealth/>. There you will find the Wisconsin Minority Health Report, 2001-2005. This report includes detailed information concerning the health of Wisconsin's African American, American Indian, Asian, and Hispanic/Latino populations.

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*The Department of Health and Family Services protects and promotes the health and safety of the people of Wisconsin. Dr. Sheri Johnson is Wisconsin's State Health Officer.*