

# Sisters spread the word on diabetes prevention

By Beth Donze  
Clarion Herald

Sleeping on one pillow instead of two optimizes nighttime breathing, leads to a better night's rest and improves a person's overall mental and physical health.

Lifestyle "tweaks" such as these are among the no-nonsense tips being dispensed in a five-parish-wide effort to teach Medicare beneficiaries how to prevent diabetes and reduce their risk for related complications such as low vision, blindness, kidney failure and limb amputation.

Recently, the Sisters of the Holy Family invited the effort's leaders – the Medicare Health Improvement Organization and the Louisiana Health Care Review – to present a diabetes workshop at their motherhouse on Chef Menteur Highway. Among the 20 sisters who attended were the congregation's "Caring Health Angels," a group of sisters who provide palliative care to their convent's elderly and infirm sisters.

## Two types of diabetes

While the workshop defined Type 1 or "juvenile" diabetes – which occurs when the immune system mistakenly destroys cells that make insulin – it also offered information on Type 2 or "adult onset" diabetes, which accounts for 90 percent of total diabetes cases and often can be prevented or managed through healthy eating and regular exercise.

"We do have several sisters here who are diabetic and who are trying to control it. We asked for this workshop to assist them and to learn more (about diabetes) ourselves," said Sister of the Holy Family Joan Flores. "Some people have it and they don't even realize it," said Sister Joan, noting that she was classified as a "borderline" diabetic many years ago during a routine physical check-up.

"Nobody in my family had it," she said. "Some people think because they're 'bor-

derline' they're not diabetic, but 10 years before you're diagnosed with diabetes, you have it. After you're diagnosed you have to keep checking to make sure it doesn't get worse."

The workshop, led by Dr. Gwendolyn Dean, taught the sisters that even borderline diabetics should have their eyes, feet, blood pressure and blood-sugar levels regularly checked.

To determine if any of the sisters could be classified as "obese" – a condition that is one of adult-onset diabetics' biggest red flags – Dr. Dean invited participants to step on a scale and provided them with a height-weight chart. Other symptoms of the disease include having a sore that doesn't heal; dark coloration around the neck – due to improper blood flow; uneven breathing; and darkened toenails.

## Body is interconnected

"Dr. Dean explained the whole workings of the body, how everything is interconnected," said Sister Agnes Marie Sampia, who requested a workshop for the motherhouse after attending one at nearby St. Paul the Apostle Church.

"If you had red meat on Labor Day, some of that food is still in your body (weeks later)," Sister Agnes Marie said, adding that other models showed how grease and sugar collect in the body in the absence of a balanced diet that includes fresh fruit, vegetables and whole grains.

"Dr. Dean also brought out certain foods to show which foods don't digest well and which foods are very good for your digestive system," Sister Agnes Marie said. "She not only talked about it, she brought samples. We had lunch together."

The sisters were encouraged to select, whenever possible, foods that were not genetically modified and to resist the habit of skipping breakfast after the nighttime "fast." A good rule of thumb is to make half your plate veg-



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etable, one quarter protein, and one quarter grains. Salty and processed foods such as meat patties should be banished from the grocery cart.

"We're all now having more salads and more fruit," noted Sister Servant of the Most Sacred Heart Gertrude Uloko, a graduate student at Our Lady of Holy Cross College and a workshop attendee currently in residence with the Sisters of the Holy Family.

"I find that you can easily eat a balanced diet (in America), but in Nigeria most of the food is natural," said Sister Gertrude, whose mother is diabetic. "When I go back home to Nigeria I will be able to help her."

Sister Jean Martinez, who was unable to attend the workshop, said she has benefited from her fellow sisters' new knowledge, both in terms of her own health and

the health of the infirmed sisters in her care, some of them full-fledged diabetics.

"I admire the way Sister Joan manages her eating (as a diabetic)," Sister Jean said. "I am putting more salad in my bowl, and now I eat my salad before I eat the rest of my meal."

## Raising awareness

Sister Agnes Marie hopes the participation of women religious in the diabetes workshops will raise public awareness of the disease, which afflicts 24 million Americans and is the country's seventh-leading cause of death, with 233,000 annual victims.

"The more (the laity) see religious involved, the more they tend to feel comfortable. If they see the sisters are going, they think, 'Maybe we should go,'" Sister Agnes Marie said, pointing out that

A group of sisters called the "Caring Health Angels" recently attended a daylong workshop on how to prevent and manage diabetes, a disease that afflicts some of their fellow sisters. The Caring Health Angels include, from left, Sisters Evelyn Estrada, Joan Flores, Gertrude Uloko, Agnes Marie Sampia and Jean Martinez. All are Sisters of the Holy Family except for Sister Gertrude, a Nigerian-born Sister Servant of the Most Sacred Heart currently studying in New Orleans. "I'm not a diabetic, but I had heard so much about diabetes in the media and in the newspapers, and you can always learn more," Sister Evelyn said.

her congregation's diabetes prevention efforts square well with the mission of Servant of God Mother Henriette Delille, foundress of the Sisters of the Holy Family. The 19th-century New Orleans native dedicated her life to caring for people of color during the era of slavery.

"She went looking for the sick and brought them back to her home to care for them," Sister Agnes Marie said. "Wouldn't it be nice if we could do that – not just read about it and pray about it – but do it?"

The workshops, entitled "Every Diabetic Counts," are available to residents of a five-parish area including Orleans and Jefferson parishes. For more information, call the program's toll-free number at (888) 321-3555.

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