When Is Ethnicity Relevant in a Case Report?

To the Editor—With reference to a recently published case report of a 29-yr-old woman with a bronchial trifurcation at the carina, we fail to understand the medical or epidemiologic relevance of describing the patient as "Hispanic." The term Hispanic refers to a cultural group, not a racial group. Hispanics may be white, black, Asian, or any other race. The 1990 Census considers persons to be of Spanish/Hispanic origin if the person's origin or ancestry is Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Argentinean, Colombian, Costa Rican, Dominican, Ecuadorian, Guatemalan, Honduran, Nicaraguan, Peruvian, Salvadoran; from other Spanish-speaking countries of the Caribbean or Central or South America; or from Spain. In fact, the only real prerequisite for being Hispanic is self-identification. For federal data collection purposes, Hispanic persons are those who say they are Hispanic. A large number of Hispanics in the United States are bilingual. Thus, this classification does not necessarily mean that the individual cannot speak English. The term Hispanic has caused controversy in the past and has been associated with derogatory remarks. A number of alternative terms have been used by Hispanic-Americans to name themselves, including Spanish or Latino.

Our comments should not be interpreted as excessive sensitivity nor to suggest that the term "Hispanic" should not be used. We suggest avoiding labeling patients in a scientific publication, unless the description adds relevant, pertinent, and useful information.

Rafael Ortega, M.D.
Assistant Professor of Anesthesiology
Marcelle M. Willock, M.D.
Professor and Chairman
Department of Anesthesiology
Boston University Medical Center
88 East Newton Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02118

References

In Reply—Ortega and Willock make several excellent and thoughtful points. The use of the adjective "Hispanic" has no useful medical or epidemiologic purpose in our article that I know of. I thank Ortega and Willock for their culturally sensitive comments.

Jonathan L. Benumof, M.D.
Professor of Anesthesiology
Department of Anesthesiology, 0801
University of California, San Diego

Reference

Jonathan L. Benumof, M.D.
Professor of Anesthesiology
Department of Anesthesiology, 0801
University of California, San Diego

9500 Gilman Drive
La Jolla, California 92037-0801

Reference

(Accepted for publication June 26, 1994.)