

# Caring for Invisible Humanity

By S. Mary Bodde

On summer nights for the last four years, S. Montiel Rosenthal, M.D., has been treating “backsiders” (exercise riders, grooms and walkers) at River Downs Race Track in Cincinnati, Ohio, during the racing season – Memorial Day to Labor Day. This is a migrant population with limited access to health care. On the faculty at the University of Cincinnati, Dr. Montiel was recruited in 2004 by Dr. Joe Kiesler, a co-worker and director of the underserved track employees through The Christ Hospital/UC Family Medicine Resident Program.

The goal, according to Dr. Joe, is to identify the medical issues these people have and to help them find their way into the mainstream medical system. Tracks in New York, Massachusetts, Kentucky and California have similar programs, but River Downs is the only Thoroughbred track in Ohio with a clinic for “a population of people no one knew existed.”

“Our clinic began in part of the chaplain’s trailer,” Dr. Montiel said. “Now we work in a double-wide trailer from 5:30 p.m. until 8:30 p.m. and often until 10 p.m. – as long as anyone is there needing medical care.”

The trailer has four exam rooms and two central living spaces (a waiting room and a meeting room for the medical staff to review cases with residents). The room also has a donated low-tech EKG machine.

“Backsiders are in low-paying and often dangerous physical jobs,” Dr. Montiel said. “They suffer from horse bites or other physical injuries and chronic medical problems, and most have no health insurance. There is a physician for the jockeys but not for the backsiders.”

In her four years of service at River Downs, Dr. Montiel has seen only two jockeys. “They just happened to be there one of my evenings,” she said. She has never watched the races.

Backsiders live dangerous lives. Exercisers (and jockeys) are placed in physically demanding situations, which can cause stress or injury to the back, neck, shoulders, knees and ankles. Severe internal or spinal injuries also can result.

In the stall, backsiders are subject to injury, as well. A jumpy horse may kick or bite. In one emergency, Dr. Montiel sewed up a patient’s face from a horse bite – on-site. “He healed quite well,” she said, “and the scar hardly shows.”



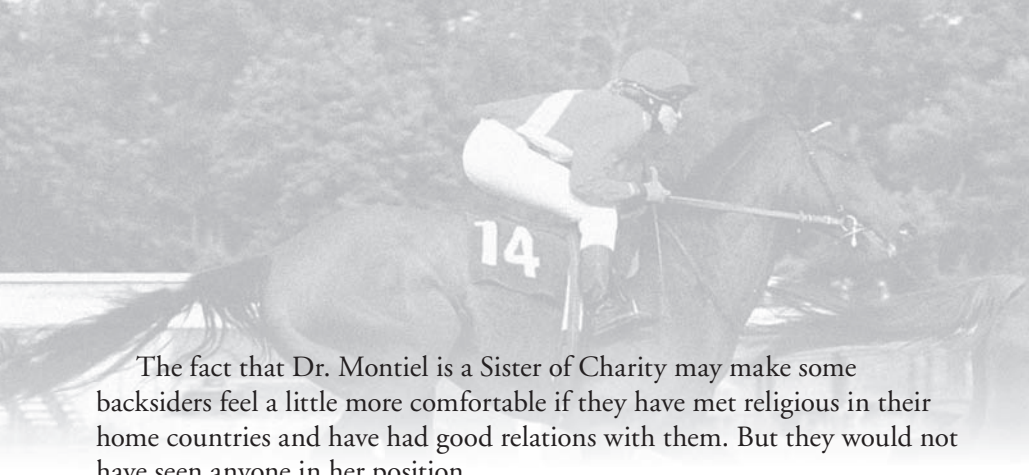
During the racing season, S. Montiel Rosenthal, M.D., provides medical care and treatment to the underserved track employees at River Downs Race Track in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Approximately 200 seasonal employees, many Latinos from El Salvador, Peru and Venezuela, but most from Mexico, begin their day at 4 a.m. grooming and exercising horses, Dr. Montiel explained. “Most are between 30 and 50, but some are older – in their 70s and even 80s,” she said.

“They believe that they can do something for the horses. They are thrilled if they think they can help them win,” she added. “And they do their job often down by the [Ohio] river where it is hot and steamy.” (There are fans for the horses in the barns but not for the backsiders.)

“Because these workers may be unfamiliar with medical care in the states, or are fearful,” Dr. Montiel explained, “we hold a health fair at the beginning of the racing season so they know that they can have access to health care lab tests, for instance. They can take advantage of other medical procedures free, such as mammograms and prostate cancer screening.”

“They may say that they are ‘nervous’ when they are really depressed because of their work or social circumstances. Many haven’t seen family in years, or they are in physical decline, or may even have one or more major medical diseases. We try to address the medical problems and coordinate ongoing follow-up.”



The fact that Dr. Montiel is a Sister of Charity may make some backsiders feel a little more comfortable if they have met religious in their home countries and have had good relations with them. But they would not have seen anyone in her position.

Accompanied by two medical students and residents from Family Medicine or Internal Medicine programs at the University of Cincinnati, Dr. Montiel continues her teaching. She presents the student as the interviewer to the patient.

“After the interview I help them improve their diagnostic skills by asking: ‘What’s going on here? What’s most unusual or challenging?’” she said. “If expensive medicine is the first choice, I help them think outside the box: ‘Is there another treatment that would be more affordable and still effective?’”

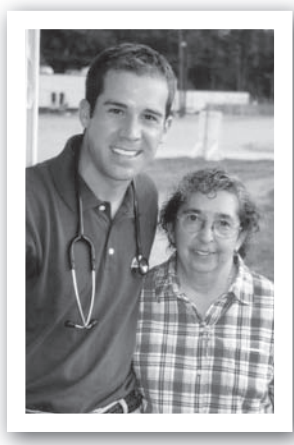
Some of the medical issues encountered include respiratory problems, ulcers, back and joint pain, elevated blood pressure and high cholesterol, dehydration, gastro-intestinal problems, and occasionally, chronic emphysema, blood clots and emergencies. Some patients have self-medicated with real “horse pills” to reduce pain, but this could cause kidney damage or severe stomach irritation. They may be depressed or substance abusers. Patients often just need to talk to a doctor about problems back home.

Dr. Kiesler, the organizer of this clinic, explained it took awhile to gain the trust of the workers, who are not used to seeing doctors and have concerns about how the health care system works. Workers and their families don’t have to pay because the clinic is funded through grants, support and in-kind donations from River Downs, the Ohio Horseman’s Benevolent and Protective Association, University and Free Clinics, Su Casa Hispanic Ministries, and a growing number of partnerships that Dr. Kiesler has added each year.

### What does this gratis service at River Downs mean to Dr. Montiel?

“I deeply respect the working poor,” she said. “They are doing their best to keep families together. They believe in the dignity of work and enjoy what they are doing. It is a privilege to meet people’s needs in a kind, compassionate way. I also can gently help facilitate younger professionals in their service to the underserved – to recognize their dignity (especially beginning medical students) and to learn more about *invisible humanity*.”

*Some of the information in this article was provided from “Out of the Money,” an article that ran in the May 2008 issue of Cincinnati Magazine.*



S. Barbara Padilla occasionally assists physicians treating underserved track employees with Spanish medical translation.



A certified medical acupuncturist, Dr. Montiel Rosenthal (right) calls S. Rose Cheng her “source of inspiration.”

Besides her ‘day’ job as director of maternity services of the University of Cincinnati’s Department of Family Medicine, the Residency Program of The Christ Hospital/UC Family Medicine, and the Prenatal Clinic at The Christ Hospital, Dr. Montiel has devoted a “small portion of her time” as a certified medical acupuncturist for the last five years.

“S. Rose Cheng was my source of inspiration,” she said. “She introduced me to this practice and has been very supportive. Acupuncture helps address pain on many levels – very cool in prenatal and delivery. It brings together skill and a blending of East and West medicine.”

As of April 2009, Dr. Montiel estimates she has treated more than 2,000 patients at the Sisters of Charity Motherhouse, the race track, and in her clinical practice of Family Medicine at her Forest Park office.

“To keep busy” Dr. Montiel also has regular directees for spiritual direction, and “depending on the time” gives retreats.