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Gilberto Zavala sits with his mother Guadalupe while getting a standard checkup by Dr. Salvador Sandoval at the Golden Valley Health Center Wednesday. A recent study done by the organization Children Now Inc. shows Merced ranks low in child health care service.

By Carol Reiter

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majority of children in Merced County are poor, which limits their access to health care, according to a study released Wednesday.

Children Now, a research organization, compiled health statistics for counties throughout California. The resulting study showed that while more children statewide are covered by health insurance than were 10 years ago, in Merced County almost 20 percent of low-income children have no health coverage.

That is no surprise to Mike Sullivan, president and chief executive officer of Golden Valley Health Centers in Merced. His clinic is a safety-net provider, giving health care to low-income and uninsured patients.

"The underlying problem in Merced County is our tremendous poverty," Sullivan said. That poverty equates to approximately 60 percent of the county's children living in a low-income household.

And low-income families are often the hardest hit by the cost of health insurance.

While Medi-Cal is available for many low-income people, Sullivan said the problem is often a matter of understanding.

A family that doesn't speak English as their first language may not understand what health care is available, and that means sick children may not see a doctor until they are very sick.

Dr. Kara Morley-Smolek, a pediatrician at the Kids' Care Clinic at Mercy Medical Center Merced, said that

many of county's outreach programs have been cut because of budget problems. That means physicians are trying to both treat sick kids and educate their families about basic health care.

"Obesity is a huge issue for kids in Merced County, and we don't have a dietitian in the county to talk to the parents," Morley-Smolek said. Trying to teach families about good nutrition takes away the time a doctor needs to spend getting patients well.

"We are doing the best we can, but we can't do it all," she said.

Obesity can cause diabetes, and the pediatrician said she has seen children come into the clinic with Type 2 diabetes, a disease that used to be seen only in adults.

The study also showed that one-third of low-income families in the county experienced problems putting food on their tables. And because of poverty, many parents may not feed their children correctly, according to Sullivan.

"It's a societal problem, but it's more dramatically played out in a poor county," he said. With lower income and education levels come less understanding of nutrition, and therefore unhealthy children, he said.

Another health problem that hits Merced County children hard is asthma, and the study showed that more than 15 percent of children under the age of 17 have asthma. Both Sullivan and Morley-Smolek agree that delivering care to asthmatic children is a concern.

"Sometimes the asthma devices are not covered by insurance, and that makes it difficult for families to obtain them," said Morley-Smolek.

SEE STUDY, PAGE A7

majority of kids in Merced County live in low-income homes  
 majority of children in Merced County have no insurance

## SICK CHILDREN

### STUDY

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

Sullivan said that access to health care is a huge issue for many of the patients at Golden Valley. "These problems start before they enter the health system, and without insurance, they feel they just can't get in the door," he said.

Other areas that the study looked at included the number of motor vehicle and pedestrian injuries. Both areas showed a rise in numbers since 1999. And almost one in seven children in the county have no dental insurance according to the study.

Making sure that children receive proper health care is

a main priority for the county, said John Volanti, Merced County's health director. But he acknowledged that with budget cuts, it will be difficult to continue some of the state-funded programs.

"There are a lot of cuts, but we are working with several other health departments and I'm hopeful that we will be able to stem the tide if the cuts come," Volanti said.

And it's not just the county's problem, according to Sullivan.

"This is not Golden Valley's problem, it's not a school problem, it is a community problem. It's a big issue, and it can't be solved overnight," he said.

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