

SENIOR FEATURE

St. Louis sisters help in Alzheimer's study

By Teresa Coyle
Catholic News Service

ST. LOUIS — A shared lifestyle and careful record-keeping through the years make a group of elderly nuns ideal subjects for a major research project on Alzheimer's disease.

Known officially as the School Sisters of Notre Dame Health and Aging Study — and unofficially as the Nun Study — the program involves some 700 volunteers from the order's seven U.S. provinces. All are 77 or older.

Participants are being assessed annually on their mobility and memory. The sisters in St. Louis will get their second round of testing next month, according to provincial councilor Sister Carol Ann Collins.

In addition, they agreed to donate brain tissue to be examined after their death.

Getting volunteers for the project was easy, Sister Collins told the *St. Louis Review*, archdiocesan newspaper. Many sisters, long accustomed to serving others, welcome a chance to help toward an understanding of what happens to the Alzheimer's patient and how to prevent the disease.

Researcher David Snowdon said, "They want to continue to teach people during the latter part of their life when they may not be able to speak or be totally disabled and after their death they

continue to want to be of service.

"They just won't quit," he added.

The study's primary focus is on Alzheimer's, but the underlying theme is an examination of factors connected with aging, "accelerated aging as well as successful aging," Snowdon said.

Snowdon, associate professor of preventive medicine at the University of Kentucky, said in a telephone interview that the project is "like an 80-year-long study following a group of 20-year-old women throughout their adult life and particularly concentrating on what happens to the survivors in old age."

He said information available in the community's archives will help in an investigation of what factors determine which of the women entering at age 20, died 10, 20 or 30 years later and which of them have maintained their mental and physical function to age 90 or older.

"We're not just looking at function in old people. Aging is something that occurs across the whole adult life span," Snowdon said.

He began pilot studies for the project about six years ago as an epidemiologist at the University of Minnesota, working with nuns in Mankato. He recognized they were a unique population for research because the nuns had lived in community most of their lives, ate the same meals, had equal access to education and health care and, for the most part, were engaged in the same occupation of teaching.

Two years ago Snowdon and a team of scientists organized the current project at the University of Kentucky's Sanders-Brown Center on Aging. He has received more than \$1 million from the National Institute on Aging and expects the study to be funded by several more millions of dollars.

Alzheimer's is a progressive, age-re-

lated incurable illness involving memory disorder. More than 4 million Americans are said to be afflicted, including more than 11 percent of those over age 65. That jumps to 25 or more percent of those over 85.

Sisters appear to be "an exceptionally long-lived population," he said. "Their increases in life expectancy throughout the century have increased at dramatic rates," more so than the general population of women.

In his earlier studies, Snowdon compared sisters of similar age and a wide range of function — from those who were bedridden and confused to those still working full time. He found that those with a higher degree of education lived approximately four years longer with better mental and physical functioning than those who did not.

"We can see that this difference in health between the high and low (education level) started when they were in their 20s and it's there in their 30s. There are differences in their mortality and it goes on throughout their whole adult life," he said.

At every age between 20 and 95, he reported that the less-educated sisters had twice the mortality rates of the more educated.

"Education in general is a very, very crude marker of many things, including intelligence and early-life socioeconomic status," Snowdon said. In the general population, lower education may be associated with various factors, such as poor diet, higher levels of stress and underemployment, and lack of health care, but with the nuns those factors are not an issue.

He now is looking at information from the sisters' early life, especially autobiographical sketches written when they took their first vows.

Calif. woman reaches 106 using faith, hope

By Beth Basilius
Catholic News Service

MONTEREY, Calif. — Althea Seamark, 106, is a woman filled with the spirit of hope. It's seen in the sparkle of her eyes and it's heard in her voice as she describes a special relationship she has always had with St. Anthony.

Miss Seamark, who is undoubtedly one of the oldest Catholics in the Monterey diocese, never married. She raised a nephew in her native Nebraska and came to California years ago to attend his wedding. Since then she's found a home — an apartment of her own in Capitola and a parish in town, St. Joseph's.

One of the biggest changes she has seen in the church over the years has been the involvement of lay people.

"I don't care how much they change things ... Change is good," she told *The Observer*, diocesan paper in Monterey. "Just so they don't change the host, and I don't think they ever will."

Remembering the many years of Latin Masses, she described today's Masses as easier to understand. As a little girl, she began singing in the church choir with her mother and stayed with it for 40 years. She said she likes the songs at today's Masses because "they jazz them up a bit these days."

Marina Wood, a friend who cooks and cleans for Miss Seamark, said her friend has a special prayer list that includes intentions for many of her friends. "She has a special relationship with St. Anthony and never fails to get us a great parking place whenever we go out," Wood said.

"All she has to do is close her eyes and concentrate for a few minutes, and then she tells me, 'Don't worry, Tony will take care of us.'"

Miss Seamark smiled in agreement and added that she has had the help of a wonderful guardian angel who takes good care of her.

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