BLOOMFIELD, Conn. & BRONX, N.Y., October 21, 2014 - The Cigna Foundation today announced a $100,000 World of Difference grant to The New York Botanical Garden to improve health care for New York's immigrant Latino and Caribbean communities. The grant will fund the work of Dr. Ina Vandebroek, an ethnomedical research specialist at The New York Botanical Garden. Dr. Vandebroek is educating medical students and physicians on how to provide clinical care based on better understanding of how their patients use medicinal plants as part of traditional remedies along with modern medicine.

The project will be influential in a new field - urban ethnobotany - which combines medical anthropology, community health, and immigrant studies with plant sciences. It's the first project of its kind to promote collaboration between plant scientists and health care professionals to address health care in Latino and Caribbean immigrant populations.

Speaking in the tropical rain forest in the Botanical Garden's Enid A. Haupt Conservatory, Cigna Foundation Executive Director David Figliuzzi said, "It's exciting to be involved in work that will help the health care system deliver culturally sensitive care to an underserved population. This work falls squarely within Cigna Foundation's focus on achieving health equity for all we serve."

Vandebroek's work seeks to uncover the nature of medicinal plant use among Latino and Caribbean communities in New York City, with an initial focus on Dominicans, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans and Jamaicans. The project will require a careful approach to researching the complexity of local plant names used by different communities, as well as these communities' cultural beliefs about what causes illnesses, their perceived symptoms, and preferred treatments with plants or pharmaceuticals. An essential component of the project includes a training program for health care professionals to enable them to communicate effectively with patients from immigrant communities about the traditional health practices they often use in parallel with modern medicine.

"Because some herbal remedies are known to interact with prescription drugs, it's essential that patients who use traditional remedies disclose this to their doctors, and that physicians have the training to respond with sensitivity to this information," Vandebroek explained.

The ultimate goal of the project is to improve patient-physician communication, which will, in turn: create increased trust between doctors and patients, foster adherence to medical treatment plans, engender respect for cultural health care practices, and prevent adverse effects from incompatible use of traditional remedies with modern medicine.

"We expect the results of this work will have an impact far beyond New York to the broader scientific and clinical community," Figliuzzi said.

The Cigna Foundation World of Difference grants provide support for improving children's wellness, senior care, women's health and health equity - the four social priorities for Cigna's corporate responsibility platform known as Cigna Connects.

About the Cigna Foundation

The Cigna Foundation, founded in 1962, is a private foundation funded by contributions from Cigna Corporation (NYSE: CI) and its subsidiaries. The Cigna Foundation supports organizations sharing its commitment to enhancing the health of individuals and families, and the well-being of their communities, with a special focus on those communities where Cigna employees live and work.
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About New York Botanical Garden

The New York Botanical Garden is a museum of plants, an educational institution, and a scientific research organization. Founded in 1891, the Botanical Garden is one of the world’s preeminent centers for studying plants at all levels, from the whole organism down to its DNA. Garden scientists conduct fundamental research on plants, algae, and fungi globally, as well as on the many relationships between plants and people. A National Historic Landmark, the Garden's 250-acre site is one of the greatest botanical gardens in the world and the largest in any city in the United States, distinguished by the beauty of its diverse landscape and extensive collections and gardens, as well as by the scope and excellence of its programs in horticulture, education, and science. Learn more: www.nybg.org