Profile: Studies find members of minority groups suffer from Alzheimer's disease at a much higher rate than white Americans

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LESTER HOLT, co-host:

Now to a medical mystery with a fascinating new twist. A spate of studies about Alzheimer's disease shows that members of minority groups suffer at a much higher rate than white Americans. Here's NBC's chief science correspondent Robert Bazell.

Ms. JOAN RODRIGUEZ: Here you go, Mother.

ROBERT BAZELL reporting:

For eight years, Joan Rodriguez...

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: (To mother) Is it good?

BAZELL: ...put her life on hold to care for her mother, Alicia, who immigrated from Mexico and recently died of Alzheimer's.

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: I remember her joy for dancing, her joy for living. She used to love her Spanish music.

(To mother) Look at you dancing!

BAZELL: Alzheimer's is a major medical mystery. And many experts are now concerned about an increase in Alzheimer's among Latinos and other minorities.

Ms. MARIA CARRILLO (National Alzheimer's Association): Alzheimer's disease is definitely a special problem in the Hispanic community, but overall, it is an epidemic in the United States, and actually, all over the world.

BAZELL: One of the biggest studies in the differences of rates of Alzheimer's disease comes from here, the very ethnically diverse Washington Heights neighborhood of New York City. It found that Hispanics and African Americans had twice the rates as whites.
Dr. RICHARD MAYEUX: How much vascular disease contributes...

BAZELL: Dr. Richard Mayeux of Columbia University Medical Center who headed this study says the big mystery is whether it's genetics or factors related to poverty, such as diabetes and obesity, which contribute to Alzheimer's risk.

Dr. MAYEUX: My best scientific evidence is that it's a genetic risk, and that we're seeing different genes causing increased risks in these different populations.

BAZELL: Experts know that more educated people tend to be diagnosed less often.

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: (To mother) Want some more tea?

BAZELL: Joan Rodriguez says her mother's case was especially sad because she had always wanted to study more.

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: Because she was very bright. And in Mexico, where she was born, she actually skipped two grades.

BAZELL: A dream, like so many, stolen by this terrible affliction.

Ms. RODRIGUEZ: (To mother) Want to see the kids?