

HEALTH

HEALTHWIRE

TAKING ANOTHER LOOK AT SICKLE CELL DISEASE

PART I

By Malaika Brown

No longer in the limelight of medical dilemmas although still a major health concern, sickle cell disease (SCD) is suffering from an anemia of its own as federal funds for research decrease and public awareness fails to make a measurable mark on the number of infants with the blood disorder.

Sickle cell disease includes several hereditary blood disorders and is characterized by a special type of hemoglobin in red blood cells that causes them to become sickle-shaped and inflexible thus blocking blood flow.

Sickle cell anemia is the most prevalent form of SCD and affects roughly one in 400 African Americans (World Health Organization). SCD also affects people of Mediterranean, Caribbean, South and Central America, Arabian and East Indian ancestry.

The most common symptom of SCD is pain caused by blockages in the blood flow.

Blockages are not predictable and painful episodes may occur as little as once a year or as often as 20 times a year. Because of decreased blood flow, older SCD patients may develop heart problems or lung clots which make them more vulnerable to pneumonia or chronic lung disease.

At least half of the adults with SCD rely on public assistance since SCD-related crises are unpredictable and can interfere with the normal day-to-day activities such as going to work.

For infants and children, SCD is even more pervasive. Blood clots in the extremities frequently cause severe swelling of the hands and feet.

Children with SCD also run the risk of going into shock when blockages occur in glands, particularly the spleen. And, infants with SCD are highly susceptible to bacterial infections which are the primary killers of young SCD sufferers. Because of a deficiency of red blood cells, children with SCD often cannot participate in vigorous childhood activities because they do not have the energy of their healthy counterparts and tire more easily.

"We've known all the same facts of sickle cell anemia since 1952 and that has had almost no impact on the treatment of the disease," said Donald Rucknagel, director of the Cincinnati Comprehensive Sickle Cell Center. He added that SCD will

remain an unsolved puzzle until scientists' understand how to manipulate the sickle-causing hemoglobin in red blood cells.

That question will become even harder to answer as federal funds for sickle cell research decrease.

According to the national Institutes of Health, funding levels for Sickle cell research remained about the same for fiscal years 1991 and '92 at more than \$35 million. But in 1993, funding levels took a dramatic plunge to just under \$26 million. "Research is suffering," said Rucknagel who was forced to look for alternative funding to fill a \$1.5 million gap left by lost NIH funds.

To Be Continued.

Malaika Brown is a reporter for the Los Angeles Sentinel who lives in Long Beach, California.

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2ND ANNUAL WELLNESS FESTIVAL

The second annual Wellness Festival presented by the Chuck Minker Sports Complex, 275 N. Mojave Rd., takes place from 9 am-3 pm, Saturday, July 24. Exhibitors from the areas of diet

and nutrition, sports medicine, holistic sciences, medical breakthrough, exercise equipment, fitness apparel, and more will be on hand to answer questions and demonstrate their products.

This event is free to the public and sponsored by the City of Las Vegas. Exhibit space is still available through July 12 at a cost of \$20 per booth. Call 229-6563.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS OUTPATIENT CLINIC RECEIVES ACCREDITATION WITH COMMENDATION FROM THE JOINT COMMISSION ON HEALTHCARE ORGANIZATIONS

By J.A. Denogean, Public Affairs Officer

The Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic (VAOPC), 1703 W. Charleston Blvd., Las Vegas, Nevada, was recently surveyed by the Joint Commission on Healthcare Organizations (JCAHO). The survey resulted in a three year accreditation with commendation. The Las Vegas Outpatient Clinic received a score of 98 out of a possible 100, highest score ever earned by an independent VA Outpatient clinic.

The JCAHO is an external, non-governmental accrediting body which surveys 5,400 hospitals and 3,600 other healthcare programs across the country. This body is governed by a 24-Member Board with representatives which include the American College of Physicians, American College of Surgeons, the American Medical Association,

and American Hospital Association and has been accrediting facilities since 1951. "Receiving Accreditation with Commendation is a significant achievement, one that recognizes exemplary performance by the Las Vegas Outpatient Clinic," said Dennis S. O'Leary, M.D., Joint Commission president. "The organization should be commended for its commitment to providing quality care to the people in its community." The facility Director Mr. Leonard C. Rogers acknowledged the commendation as a confirmation to the exceptional quality of care offered the Southern Nevada Veterans by the VAOPC staff. "We are extremely pleased to have achieved this designation," said Mr. Rogers. "Everyone here goes the extra mile on a day-to-day basis to provide the best possible health care to our patients."

HEALTHWIRE NEWS BRIEFS

HANDGUNS: AN EMERGING CHILDREN'S HEALTH ISSUE

A new survey by Louis Harris (LH Research) shows a dramatic increase about the impact of gun violence on the lives of American children.

Among the polls findings: "One in five parents say they have or know someone who has a child who was wounded or killed by another child with a gun." One in five parents knows a child "who was so worried that he or she got a gun for self-protection."

The figure is one in three for African-American parents. In addition, one in six parents re-

port knowing a child who was found playing with a gun that was loaded.

The survey was prepared for the Harvard School of Public Health with funding by the Joyce Foundation of Chicago.

The poll confirms that "Americans are desperately concerned about how guns effect their children," said Joyce Foundation President Deborah Leff. Ms. Leff said that in addition to furthering the Harvard School of Public Health's work, the poll could be used by community groups who have an interest in this issue of handgun related violence and children.

FOR COPIES OF THE STUDY CALL: LH Research at (212) 332-2250.

NATIONAL CANCER PREVENTION STUDY FOCUSES ON AFRICAN AMERICAN, LATINA AND LOW INCOME WOMEN

The National Cancer Institute (NCI) is conducting the first, large-scale women's health study designed to ensure that African American and Latino women make-up 50% of the participants.

The trial will measure the value of low-fat eating patterns in reducing the risk of breast, colon and other cancers. The trial is important because there is little information on the impact of social customs, culture, and economic status on following dietary patterns that reduce fat intake.

Women ages 45-69, who are interested in participating should contact one of the following study sites:

- Univ. of Alabama at Birmingham, Albert Oberman, M.D. (205) 934-2374
- Univ. of Miami Fla., Terence Gerace, Ph.D. (305) 567-3850
- Emory Univ., Decatur, Ga., Dallas Hall, M.D. (404) 477-3000

AFRICAN-AMERICANS ARE AT RISK FOR KIDNEY DAMAGE

HOUSTON — Practical lifestyle changes could reduce risks of kidney damage among diabetic and hypertensive blacks.

Diabetes and hypertension are the leading causes of kidney failure, particularly in African-Americans, said Dr. Donald Wesson of Baylor College of Medicine in Houston.

Wesson recommends these lifestyle changes:

- * Cutting back on salt.
- * Limiting alcohol consumption.

- * Eliminating tobacco use.
- * Controlling weight.
- * Eating more potassium-rich foods as fresh fruit and vegetables and avoiding canned foods.

* Exercising. Recent studies have suggested that diabetic and hypertensive African-Americans are four to five times more susceptible to developing kidney disease than are whites with the same disorders.


HEALTH BRIEFS

NIH RECOMMENDS TESTING CHILD'S HEARING AT BIRTH


New parents should routinely request that their newborns be tested for hearing loss, according to new recommendations by the National Institutes of Health in Maryland. Severe or moderate hearing impairment can prevent the development of language skills in children. Studies indicate that children whose hearing problems go undetected until age 3 or older, lose \$400,000 to \$800,000 in lifetime income because of reduced language skills. One in 1,000 children are born with severe hearing loss, and one in 3,000 to 4,000 have moderate hearing loss.

The Auditory Brain Stem (ABR) test is available at most hospitals and should be covered by insurance or medicare. The shorter, less expensive, Otoacoustic Emissions Test may be available in large cities only. For further information contact: Dr. Gregory Matz, Prof. of Otolaryngology, Loyola Univ. of Chicago Medical Center, 708/216-8878.


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