

Prostate

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have to do much better, and we are going to be very aggressive."

The Clinton administration plans to seek across-the-board increases in medical research spending for 1999, but gave Tuesday's prostate cancer call a chilly reception.

"We don't believe in pitting one disease against another," said Health and Human Services spokesman Victor Zonana.

About 184,500 American men will be diagnosed with prostate cancer this year, and almost 42,000 will die, the American Cancer Society estimates.

Black Americans have the highest risk: for every 100,000 black men, an estimated 234 will get prostate cancer this year, compared with 135 of every 100,000 white men. Black men are two to three times more likely to die of the

disease. The cancer risk increases as men age and is rare under 50 — but blacks are more likely to get prostate cancer at younger ages.

Scientists can't explain the racial disparity, although theories range from genetics to health care access and distrust of the mostly white medical establishment.

But part of the quandary is that so little is known about prostate cancer overall, said Dr. Charles McDonald of Brown University, president-elect of the cancer society.

Prostate cancer can grow so slowly that it will never threaten some patients, but doctors can't tell in advance. Doctors don't know which therapies are most effective — a key question since certain treatments cause serious side effects — nor how to reduce the risk of getting prostate cancer.

Even prostate screening is controversial:

The cancer society recommends offering men over 50 a blood test called PSA that can detect early cancer, if they first are told about the uncertainties of treatment and that PSA can be wrong. But the National Medical Association, a black physicians' group, says all black men should get PSA testing and education starting at age 40, said Dr. Isaac Powell of Wayne State University.

The American Cancer Society decided the questions were so important that it dedicated 10 percent of its research budget — about \$10 million — solely to prostate cancer this year.

Thomas Dortch, president of 100 Black Men, said that the group plans nationwide rallies to raise grass-roots support for increased federal spending on prostate cancer, and that Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., has promised to press for the money in Congress.

In addition, the advocacy groups will create prostate cancer education programs targeting black men, and attempting to dispel cultural barriers.

Another goal is to get more black men into clinical trials attempting to find a gene for prostate cancer and better treatments.

McDonald draws hope from breast cancer: A decade ago, most women's only treatment choice was mastectomy — removing her entire breast. Women's activists in the 1990s pushed the government to spend hundreds of millions more on programs that not only helped reduce breast cancer deaths, but today offer women therapies that can save their breasts along with their lives.

With the new prostate cancer campaign, "if we do half as much ... we will have achieved a lot," McDonald said.

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