

HEALTH

Solutions vary in racial health disparities

By the Associated Press

Identifying racial disparities in health is easy. Understanding them is tougher.

And eliminating them? That's the real challenge.

The issues are national: How to train more black doctors, move more people out of poverty, get health insurance to those without.

But solutions often amount to individual people or programs working to solve small pieces of the problem.

Magic fingers educates while beautifying

Women come to Magic Fingers in Brooklyn for a weave or a manicure, but often they leave with a lesson on breast cancer or a primer on AIDS. It's part of the Black Pearls program, where health educators go to beauty shops, barbers, churches and laundry mats, said Ruth C. Browne,

director of the Arthur Ashe Institute for Urban Health.

There's a lecture once a month at Magic Fingers, with videos and pamphlets on other days. Topics have included AIDS, heart disease and breast cancer.

Owner Ursula Sandy figures women are talking about personal problems anyway, including health, so it makes sense to bring in experts.

"A lot of the clients didn't even know how to search their breasts for lumps," she says. "At least they know."

More women walking their way to health

In small groups across the country, women are doing something simple: They're walking.

"Walking is a form of sisterhood," says Myra McGinnis, who walks with a half-dozen women once a

month in Columbus, Ohio. "During that time, you can talk about any issues that are bothering you."

In other cities, groups walk several times a week — increasing cardiovascular strength and controlling weight.

"We try to help women to understand what is within their control to change — even if it's one little thing" says Julia Scott of the National Black Women's Health Project, which has organized 8,000 women into walking groups.

Breastfeeding can bolster baby's immune system

The nurse handed Tabatha Johnson her brand-new baby girl and asked the question she'd been fearing: Did she want to breast feed?

Johnson, just 18, knew it was the right thing to do, but was scared. Scared it would

hurt. Scared that any junk food she ate would be passed onto her daughter.

Then she remembered Garima Mathur, the nutritionist at her medical center, who works to persuade mothers to breast feed. Mathur explains the advantages: Breast milk bolsters a baby's immune system and offers nutrients not in infant formula.

"That was the first thing that came to my head," Johnson remembers. "It was Garima telling me, 'You should breast feed, you should breast feed.' I said, OK, I'll do it."

Three months later, she's happy she did, even if the first few days were frustrating. Now Johnson is trying to convince pregnant friends. "They're like, 'I'm not doing that,'" she said. "I say, trust me."

HEALTH BRIEFS

GROUP GETS GRANT TO HELP FIGHT DIABETES AMONG MINORITIES

OMAHA, Neb. (AP)—The Urban League of Nebraska has been awarded \$275,000 from U.S. Health and Human Services to help in the fight against diabetes among minorities. Sen. Bob Kerrey, D-Neb., said last week that the Nebraska group would take a lead role in coordinating the effort with 15 Urban League organizations across the country. By targeting high-risk populations such as African-Americans and Latinos, a first step can be taken toward reducing the disproportionate impact of diabetes on some members of the community, Kerrey said. The grant will help the Urban League and other groups reach populations with culturally and linguistically appropriate information on preventing and controlling diabetes.

DIET POWERFUL WEAPON AGAINST BREAST CANCER

Washington, D.C.—Doctors at the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine reaffirmed that women can prevent breast cancer through diet. Researchers at New York University conducted a definitive study comparing the diets of 250 women with breast cancer to those of 499 women without the disease in northwestern Italy. The difference in the diets was the amount of animal products the women ate. Women who ate the most animal products had about triple the cancer risk of other women. Physicians point to increases in breast cancer cases as direct links to the fatty Western diet, based on meat, cheese, butter and milk. Alcohol, hormones, environmental toxins and genetics are also factors.

Like father, like son? Children of infertile men might yield clues

Special to Sentinel-Voice

HOUSTON—Advances in assisted reproductive technology have enabled many infertile men to overcome nature's barriers to fatherhood. But researchers don't know whether children conceived this way will inherit the infertility or possibly other genetic problems.

Dr. Dolores J. Lamb, a urology researcher at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, hopes to learn more about this unknown area by studying genetic samples from babies who were conceived through ICSI, a form of assisted reproduction.

ICSI, or intracytoplasmic sperm injection, is a laboratory procedure involving the injection of a single sperm into the egg. This technique assists men who have so few sperm that they're not likely to impregnate a woman naturally.

"In some cases, such low sperm counts are caused by genetic defects," Lamb said. "Deletions of tiny pieces of the Y chromosome, the male sex chromosome, can result in the absence of genes required for production of mature sperm."

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"Sometimes the same deletions are observed in the male offspring of men who have these genetic defects and who used ICSI to become fathers."

— Dr. Dolores J. Lamb

male offspring of men who have these genetic defects and who used ICSI to become fathers. "Although it's likely these babies will also experience infertility, it's too soon to tell because the oldest child born through ICSI is only approximately six years of age," Lamb said.

Mutations in the cystic-fibrosis (CF) gene can also cause infertility. Men with

this form of CF don't have the respiratory problems and other symptoms typically associated with cystic fibrosis.

However, they are born without a vas deferens, the tube that carries sperm from the testicle to the penis, on

either side of the scrotum. ICSI can help such men father children, but these couples need genetic counseling and CF testing, Lamb said.

In addition to deletions in Y chromosomes and mutations in the CF gene, there are more than 100 other genetic abnormalities that could be linked to infertility in men. What effect these might have on babies born through ICSI remains to be learned, Lamb said.

Approximately six million American couples are

infertile. Nearly half of the cases are due to male-related factors.

"ICSI and other forms of assisted reproductive technology are certainly effective methods for overcoming genetic defects that can cause infertility," Lamb said.

"But infertile couples need to know that there's still a lot to be learned about genetic causes of infertility and the potential risks to children born through assisted reproductive technology."

Crowded, unkempt housing conditions raise bacteria risk

Special to Sentinel-Voice

HOUSTON—People living in crowded, dirty households are at greater risk for contracting helicobacter pylori, or H. pylori, according to a new study.

Researchers from Baylor College of Medicine in Houston and medical institutions in Sweden studied the incidence of helicobacter pylori in 300 identical twins. Some lived in poorer homes, others in more affluent homes.

The study found those living in poor households were three to four times more likely to acquire H. pylori than those in affluent households. The findings were published in a recent edition of the American Journal of Epidemiology.

H. pylori is an organism that lives in the stomach and can cause stomach ulcers, gastric cancer, and gastritis. Earlier research found H. pylori is contracted in childhood, and if

untreated, can remain in a person's system for life.

"We found H. pylori is highly associated with poor hygiene and crowded living conditions, which increases the risk of infection," said Dr. Hoda Malaty, a Baylor associate professor of medicine, and the study's lead investigator. "Heredity plays no part in acquiring the infection, but there is a genetic susceptibility. However, our research shows low socioeconomic status plays more of a factor in acquiring H. pylori."

Malaty says the research points to the importance of improving personal hygiene in poorer, more crowded households.

"Make sure children wash their hands thoroughly before eating, handling any type of food, or putting their hands in their mouths," Malaty said. "This simple act can go a long way toward preventing a potentially fatal H. pylori infection."



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