

HEALTH

Genetic sign predisposes Blacks to certain cancers

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP)— Researchers have identified genetic signs unique to some blacks that appear to increase their risk for cancer of the colon and rectum.

The findings, published in the June 23 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association, could help early diagnosis, a key to survival.

"Knowing the alterations is helpful when trying to look for them in families that are affected," said Dr. Thomas Weber, who led the two-year study at Roswell Park Cancer Institute.

While similar links between colorectal cancer and specific genetic mutations have already been

established among a handful of nationalities and ethnic groups, the new study was the first to focus on blacks.

The nation's third-leading cause of cancer deaths, colorectal cancer is expected to strike 129,400 people in the United States this year and kill 55,000.

Blacks suffer higher rates of cancer of the colon and rectum than other racial and ethnic groups and die more frequently from the disease.

However, the researchers said the genetic alterations are probably not an explanation for the higher death rate: that is largely attributable to late-stage diagnosis.

In any case, regular

screening for cancer is essential, Weber said.

"Anything we can do to help identify who's at risk and direct clinical surveillance to those people would be very helpful," he said.

Despite easy take-home tests, only about 40 percent of Americans over the age of 50 are screened regularly for colorectal cancer, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said.

The Roswell Park research, done over the past two years, looked at 11 unrelated black colorectal cancer patients.

The study determined that defects of the so-called "mismatch repair" genes,

which normally repair DNA in cells that fail to replicate properly, contribute to hereditary nonpolyposis colorectal cancer, a specific

type.

The American Cancer Society recommends that men and women 50 or older get tested annually to detect

cancers of the colon or rectum. Screening should begin earlier for people with a strong family history of cancer.

Black couple can't find egg donor

WASHINGTON (AP)— Married 14 years and yearning to have their own baby, Cathy and David, a young black couple from suburban Philadelphia, thought their prayers were answered when a black woman agreed in 1996 to donate her eggs so they could conceive.

But their dream was dashed when the would-be donor backed out of her contract. The reason: She was scared of needles.

After a two-year search for another donor, they again hit pay dirt. Or so they thought. This time, the donor got pregnant days before she was to begin the donation procedure.

Today the couple, who asked that their real names not be used for this article, still is looking for a black woman willing to donate her eggs.

It's been an emotionally and financially draining three-year ordeal. Especially galling for them is knowing that if they were white, the search for an egg donation would almost certainly have been easier.

The couple's determination to have a child whose skin color is like their own brought them face to face with a racial squeeze in the rapidly growing field of assisted fertility — a severe lack of black and other racial minority donors of eggs or sperm.

"If we were white, we would have had a child years ago," said the father-in-waiting, a 44-year-old clergyman. "White people

have so many options. They can pick the height, weight, eye color — just about anything they want for a donor. We have almost no options — none.

"We aren't blaming anyone. We aren't crying discrimination or anything like that. It's just the way it is. But it's been a very sad situation for us."

Relatively few members of minority groups seek out donors for assisted fertility. But those who do find their options on donor characteristics extremely limited compared with whites.

"It's been a concern among some in this field, but since the number of blacks seeking out donors is small, the issue has been hidden," said Dr. Abraham Munabi, founder of the Reproductive Science Institute near Philadelphia, a leading fertility clinic. "Black and other minority infertile couples seeking help are suffering."

The plight of black couples seeking black egg or sperm donors is borne out on Web sites that list potential donors, including their race, ethnicity, height, eye color, educational background and blood type.

The sperm donor Web site of OPTIONS National Fertility Registry, a Los Angeles-based fertility clinic, lists no blacks, two Hispanics and one Asian among the 32 sperm donor profiles.

On the Northwest Andrology & Cryobank Web site, there are no blacks, Hispanics or Asians among

24 donors. And the Rainbow Flag Health Services Web site, which states, "We are especially interested in finding African-American and Jewish donors," has one Asian and no blacks or Hispanics.

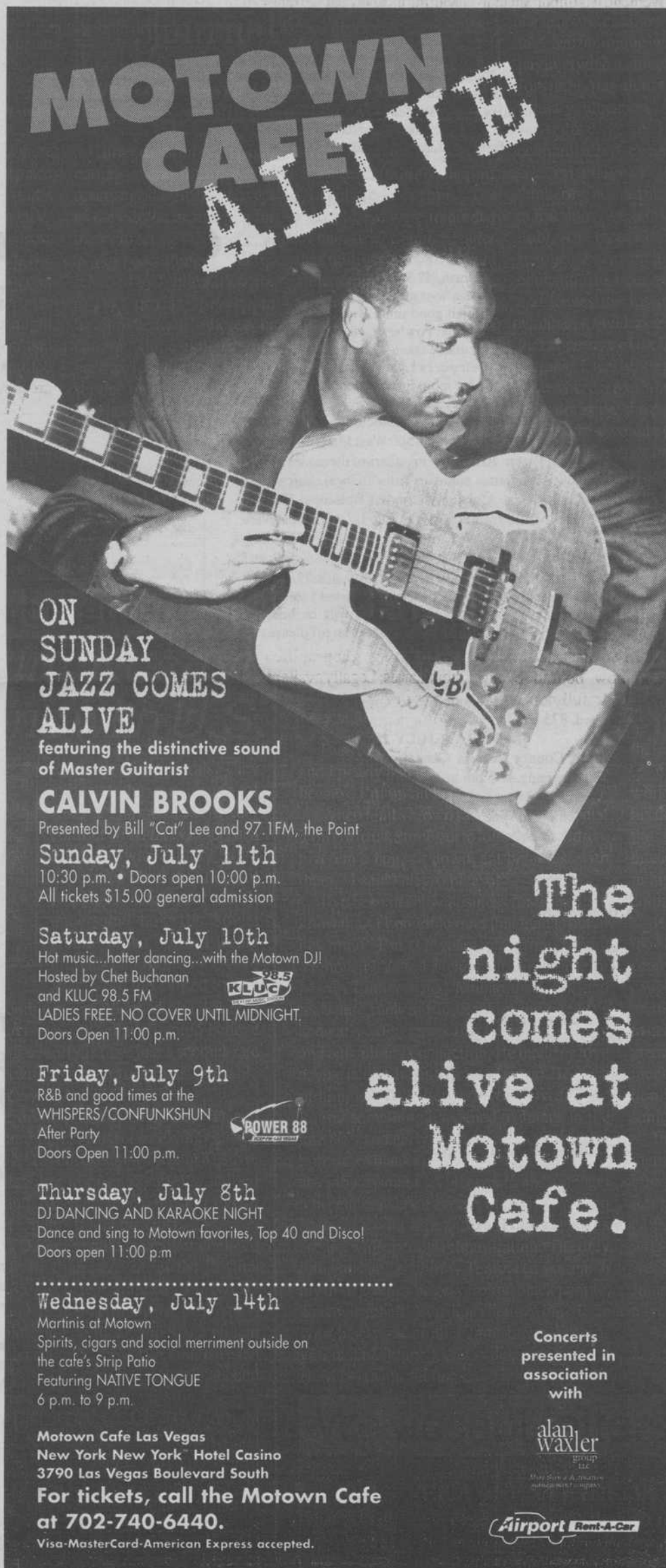
"If a black man comes in and says he wants to be a donor, we get very excited because they are so few and far between," said John Olson, president of Cryogenic Laboratories Inc. in Minnesota, one of the nation's oldest and largest semen banks.

"The number of individuals seeking black sperm donations is small but those people have virtually nowhere to go," he said.

Olson, whose facility had six blacks, 14 Asians and three Hispanics on its donor list, said that because of stringent screening requirements, the sperm donation shortage cuts across racial lines but is most severe among minorities. His facility's acceptance rate for sperm donors is about 17 percent.

Testing costs around \$1,500 per donor, said Olson. The sperm of Jewish men is the most highly sought after, but all donors — who are asked to give four deposits each month — receive the same pay: \$40 per deposit.

The American Society for Reproductive Medicine says the number of children born with assisted techniques has grown nearly tenfold in recent years — from 250 babies in 1985 to 21,198 in 1996, the most recent year for which figures are available.



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