

Cancer

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of 20,000 black doctors.

The study looked at 10,984 patients in a National Cancer Institute database of people in five states and five cities outside of those states. To remove the availability of insurance as a factor, the researchers looked only at people who were at least 65 years old, and thus covered by Medicare.

They found 76.7 percent of the white patients had surgery, but only 64 percent of the black patients did.

Since poverty makes it harder to get good care, the

researchers also tried to look at the poorest patients, black and white. They looked for people living in a ZIP code where the average income was in the nation's bottom quarter. There was still a black-white difference of nearly 9 percentage points.

"Clearly, it's killing people," said Dr. Rodney Hood of San Diego, president-elect of the NMA.

But Dr. Garrett Walsh, a thoracic surgeon at M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston, said the racial gap may be an oversimplification.

He said the researchers had "fuzzy" information about

income and whether the patients had other diseases that might have kept them from getting surgery. Patients' personal thoughts about whether the surgery could help them may also be a big issue, he said.

Hood said doctors' bias could keep some elderly blacks from getting surgery, as could misunderstandings between white doctors and their black patients.

Many patients — blacks and whites alike — are afraid surgery can spread cancer, and believe that was why a friend or close relative died after an operation, doctors say.

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