

Mississippi health office studying Blacks' hearts

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) - Health officials are evaluating preliminary findings of a major heart study involving Black people in Mississippi.

"We will have discovered some things we didn't know before and will be in a position to help with preventative measures in the future," said Justin Vincent, senior operations manager of the Jackson Heart Study.

More than 5,000 Black men and women ages 35-84 have been participating in The Jackson Heart Study at the University of Mississippi Medical Center since fall 2000.

The study investigates the high rate of cardiovascular disease among Black people. It's an expansion from a larger national study, Atherosclerosis Risk in Communities, which included Whites and Blacks in four geographically diverse communities in the United States in the late 1980s and 1990s. In Jackson, only Black people were studied.

Information was gathered from a series of questionnaires including lifestyle habits, medical history, medica-

tions, social and cultural function and lab measurements.

Vincent said Tuesday he hopes the study will be extended for 10 more years to do other rounds.

He said this is the first study of cardiovascular disease in Black people. It's sponsored by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute and the National Center on Minority Health and Health Disparities. Jackson State University and Tougaloo College also are involved.

Vincent said Jackson was chosen because Mississippi has a high percentage of Black residents and some of the worst health statistics in the nation.

"There was not a better place to carry out such a study," he said.

He said the state is "right up there when it comes to cardiovascular disease, stroke, diabetes and hypertension. We have a lot of work to do."

Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the nation and in Mississippi.

Mississippi's State De-

partment of Health receives funds from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to support state programs for heart disease and stroke prevention.

The state also is a part of the Delta States Stroke Consortium, along with Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana and Tennessee.

These states run along The Stroke Belt region, which encompasses the Southeast with the highest incidence and mortality of stroke in the United States.

"We are going to continue to try and get people's attention," said Dr. Mary Armstrong, medical director for the Office of Health Promotions for the state Health Department.

"Things aren't going as well as we would like to see them, but we would like to see people know their numbers, take ownership and take control to live a healthy life."

The Know Your Numbers campaign took off in 2002 and promotes people knowing their blood pressure, cholesterol, glucose and body mass index.

AIDS

(Continued from Page 6)

AIDS. "Why are women more vulnerable to infection?" he asked, rhetorically. "Why is that so even where they are not the ones with the most sexual partners outside marriages, nor more likely than men to be injecting drug users?"

Answering his own question, he continued: "Usually, because society's inequalities put them at risk — unjust, unconscionable risk. A range of factors conspires to make this so: poverty, abuse and violence, lack of information, coercion by older men, and men having several concurrent sexual relationships that entrap young women in a giant network of infection.

"These factors cannot be addressed piecemeal. What is needed is real, positive change that will give more power and confidence to women and girls. Change that will transform relations between women and men at all levels of society."

Rather than initiate institutional change, however, many policymakers have adopted simplistic approaches to addressing the AIDS pandemic.

"The ABC approach — Abstain, Be faithful, use Condoms — is not a sufficient means of prevention for women and adolescent girls," UNFPA Executive Director Thoraya Obaid says in a statement. "Abstinence is meaningless to women who are coerced into sex. Faithfulness offers little protection to wives whose husbands have several partners or were infected before marriage. And condoms require the cooperation of men."

She adds, "The social and economic

empowerment of women is key. The epidemic won't be reversed unless governments provide the resources needed to ensure women's right to sexual and reproductive health."

Recommendations included:

- Establishing programs that respond to women's needs in prevention, treatment, community-based care, education, violence and human rights;

- Undertaking gender analysis at every stage of policy design, implementation and evaluation to ensure that all forms of gender discrimination are eliminated and to protect and promote women's human rights;

- Ensuring that adolescent girls and women have the knowledge and means to prevent HIV infection;

- Empowering women economically by providing them with access to credit and business and leadership skills to break the cycle of poverty, gender inequality and vulnerability to HIV transmission and

- Promoting zero tolerance of all forms of violence against women and girls;

The report concluded: "... Without leadership and political will, without the necessary funding, the situation for women and girls will continue to deteriorate and the hope of achieving the Millennium Development Goals by 2015 — particularly reducing extreme poverty — will not be fulfilled. We can no longer look at women as victims; it is time to recognize and build on their strengths. Strategies to reverse the AIDS epidemic cannot succeed unless women and girls are empowered to claim their rights."



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