

Study examines Black women, breast cancer

By Tracie Reddick
Special to Sentinel-Voice
ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (NNPA) — Although Bessie Robinson lost her mother to breast cancer, she does not believe the disease is an automatic death sentence.

The remedy is early detection, and Robinson is giving African-American women a healthy dose of this reality through an outreach effort aimed at finding a cure for the disease.

Dubbed the "Sister Study," the project's goal is to determine if environmental or genetic factors lead to breast cancer.

"When it comes to any disease, African-Americans are seldom treated and seldom researched," said Robinson, a senior community health nurse at the Pinellas County Health Department's Disease Control Division.

"That's what makes the 'Sister Study' so exciting. This is the first time — that I can think of — where a concerted effort has been made to include the lifestyles of African-American women in the research."

Conducted by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, the three-year study will examine the lifestyles of 50,000 women,

aged 35 to 74. Initially, the study specifically targeted minority women in Arizona, Florida, Illinois, Missouri, North Carolina, Rhode Island and Virginia who did not have breast cancer but had a sister diagnosed with it.

According to the latest NIEHS statistics, 2,500 women — of which 1,111 signed up in Florida — are currently enrolled in the study in the seven targeted states, which were selected due to their diverse populations.

In October, which kicks off Breast Cancer Awareness Month, women nationwide will be eligible to participate in the comprehensive study which requires them to fill out questionnaires and provide blood, urine, toenail and household dust samples.

A special emphasis has been placed on recruiting Black women, who are more likely to die from breast cancer, although White women develop the disease at higher rates.

"Traditionally, we have not had to recruit White women for studies of this nature," said Patricia Colantonio, director of the Office on Chronic Disease at the Pinellas County Health Department.

Colantonio noted that mammogram screenings and

annual health exams are attributed to the higher survival rate of White women diagnosed with breast cancer.

"Children represent another group that we don't have to seek out for studies because parents will go the ends of the earth to find the latest treatment or medicine that will cure their kids," she said.

Historically, Blacks refuse medical treatment due to their mistrust of the medical community.

Citing cases such as 626 men in Tuskegee, Ala. who were intentionally injected with the syphilis virus, many Blacks who lack health in-

surance fear they will be used as guinea pigs.

Others believe the power of prayer will heal their illnesses.

"We don't trust anybody other than the Lord," Robinson said.

"It doesn't have anything to do with education, but everything to do with mindset. Some of us still don't trust the medical system and will refuse to tell anyone, 'Here's my body, do what you want with it.'"

But that may be what it takes to save a life, said Robinson, whose joining health officials across the

country in their efforts to get African-Americans to seek regular check-ups as opposed to going to the emergency room just before they are about to check out.

"Most studies focus on medical reasons," Robinson said. "Until now, no one — outside of lung researchers — has ever looked at the environmental impact on various diseases. That's why we [African-American women] need to be a part of this study. It is not only important to our lives, but the lives of our mothers, aunts, daughters and of course, our sisters."

African-American

women who would like to participate in the "Sister Study" visit www.sisterstudy.com.

• The leading cancer sites for African-American women include breast, colon and rectum, lung and cervix and uteri.

• 37.7 of African-American women have high smoking rates and low participation in breast screenings.

• 54.9 percent of African-American women over 50 report having never had a mammogram and clinical breast exam.

Tracie Reddick writes for The Weekly Challenger.

Felon Voting

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several voting groups in Nevada. She also says that the vote of the ex-felon is still a viable vote, but unfortunately many political candidates seem to ignore this segment of the population.

While calls for comments on this issue were not returned by both the local Republican National Committee and the Democratic National Committee, Cordell Stokes, the liaison for the Nevada State Democratic Party and the second vice president of the Caucus of African-American Nevadans, points out that Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., has been very vocal in the fight to restore voting rights to former felons. "Sen. Reid has openly debated that issue on the floor — all felons who've served their time should be allowed to vote in Nevada." Stokes says a few other politicians and political candidates, like Steven Horsford, who is running for State Senate District 4, have voiced their approvals to restore voting rights to all ex-offenders.

The local chapter of the NAACP is also working to make sure the vote of the ex-felon is heard in Nevada. Mujahid Ramadan, vice president of the local chapter, says they've worked with PLAN and the local Democratic National Committee on targeting this part of society that so many want to ignore. Ramadan also says the NAACP had a heavy initiative to get ex-felons to register to vote, as well as helping them with employment and getting back into the mainstream of society. But while the paperwork may be burdensome, and the battle to vote is an on-going, uphill climb for many ex-offenders in Nevada, their vote, however small, is still a step in the right direction. "Some of the ex-felons we've encountered are so excited to get their voting rights back," says Hall. "Some of them haven't been able to vote for 20 or 30 years and now they feel like an American citizen again."

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